

THE BARBER'S TRADE UNION
AND OTHER STORIES

FOR
KATH AND RAJANI



By the same Author

THE SWORD AND THE SICKLE
ACROSS THE BLACK WATERS
THE VILLAGE
TWO LEAVES AND A BUD
COOLIE
UNTOUCHABLE
THE MACHINE WRECKERS

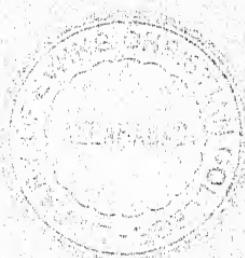
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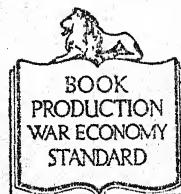
MULK RAJ ANAND



JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
LONDON

FIRST PUBLISHED 1944
SECOND IMPRESSION DECEMBER 1945

JONATHAN CAPE, LTD., 30 BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON
AND 91 WELLINGTON STREET WEST, TORONTO



THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN
COMPLETE CONFORMITY WITH THE
AUTHORIZED ECONOMY STANDARDS

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY J. AND J. GRAY, EDINBURGH
BOUNDED BY A. W. BAIN AND CO. LTD., LONDON

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Acknowledgments

ALL the stories and fables included in this volume (except the three prose poems which were originally printed by the late Eric Gill for a limited edition) have been published in the following magazines and anthologies: *New Writing*, *Best Short Stories 1937* and *1938*, *Fact No. 5*, *Our Time*, *Breakaway*, *Fortnightly Review*, *Indian Writing*, *Penguin New Writing*, *Life and Letters To-day*. I take this opportunity to offer the customary expression of gratitude to the editors.

M. R. A.

LONDON, 1943.

The Barber's Trade Union

(To John Lehmann)

AMONG the makers of modern India, Chandu, the barber boy of our village, has a place which will be denied him unless I press for the recognition of his contribution to history. Chandu's peculiar claim to recognition rested, to tell the truth, on an exploit of which he did not know the full significance. But then, unlike most great men of India to-day, he had no very exaggerated notion of his own importance, though he shared with them a certain naïve egotism which was sometimes disconcerting and sometimes rather charming.

I knew Chandu ever since the days when he wore a piece of rag in the middle of his naked, distended-bellied body, and when we wallowed together in the mire of the village lanes, playing at soldiering, shopkeeping, or clerking and other little games which we invented for the delectation of our two selves and of our mothers, who alone of all the elders condescended to notice us.

Chandu was my senior by about six months, and he always took the lead in all matters. And I willingly followed, because truly he was a genius at catching wasps, and at pressing the poison out of their tails, at tying their tiny legs to cotton thread and flying them, while I always got stung on the cheeks if I dared to go anywhere near the platform of the village well where these insects settled on the puddles to drink water.

When we grew up he still seemed to me the embodiment of perfection, because he could make and fly paper kites of such intricate design and of such balance as I could never achieve.

To be sure, he was not so good at doing sums at school as I was, perhaps because his father apprenticed him early to the hereditary profession of the barber's caste and sent him out hair-cutting in the village, and he had no time for the home tasks which our school-master gave us. But he was better than I at reciting poetry, any day,

for not only did he remember by rote the verses in the text-book, but he could repeat the endless pages of prose in that book so that they seemed like poetry.

My mother resented the fact that Chandu won a scholarship at school while I had to pay fees to be taught. And she constantly dissuaded me from playing with him, saying that Chandu was a low-caste barber's son and that I ought to keep up the status* of my caste and class. But whatever innate ideas I had inherited from my forefathers, I certainly hadn't inherited any sense of superiority. Indeed, I was always rather ashamed of the red caste mark which my mother put on my forehead every morning, and of the formalized pattern of the *uchkin*, the tight cotton trousers, the gold-worked shoes and the silk turban in which I dressed; and I longed for the right to wear all the spectacular conglomeration of clothes which Chandu wore—a pair of khaki shorts which the retired Subedar had given him, a frayed black velvet waistcoat, decorated all over with shell buttons, and a round felt cap which had once belonged to Lalla Hukam Chand, the lawyer of our village.

And I envied Chandu the freedom of movement which he enjoyed after his father died of plague. For then he would do the round of shaving and hair-cutting at the houses of the high-caste notables in the morning, bathe and dress, and then steal a ride to town, six miles away, on the foot-rest of the closed carriage in which Lalla Hukam Chand travelled to town.

But Chandu was kind to me. He knew that I was seldom taken to town, and that I had to trudge three weary miles to a secondary school in the big village of Joadiala with the fear of God in my heart, while he had been completely absolved from the ordeal of being flogged by cruel masters as he had left school after his father's death. So he always brought me some gift or other from the town—a paint brush, or gold ink, or white chalk, or a double-edged penknife to sharpen pencils with; and he would entertain me with long merry descriptions of the variety of things he saw in the bazaars of civilization.

He was particularly detailed in his description of the wonderful

English styles in clothes which he saw the Sahibs and the lawyers, the chaprasis and the policemen wearing at the District Court, where he had to wait for the journey home at the back of Lalla Hukam Chand's phaeton. And, once or twice, he expressed to me a secret wish he had to steal some money from the pitcher where his mother kept the emoluments of his professional skill, to buy himself a rig-out like that of Kalan Khan, the dentist, who, he said, performed miracles in the town, fitting people with rows of teeth and even new eyes. He described to me the appearance of Kalan Khan, a young man with hair parted on one side, and dressed in a starched shirt, with an ivory collar and bow tie, a black coat and striped trousers, and a wonderful rubber overcoat and pumps. And he recounted to me the skill with which this magician unpacked an Angrezi leather hand-bag and flourished his shining steel instruments.

Then he asked my advice on the question of whether, as a barber educated to the fifth primary class, he would not look more dignified if he, too, wore a dress in the style of Dr. Kalan Khan, 'for though I am not a highly educated doctor,' he said, 'I learnt how to treat pimples, boils and cuts on people's bodies from my father, who learnt them from his father before him.'

I agreed with his project and encouraged him with the enthusiasm I felt for everything that my hero thought or did.

One day I was thrilled to find Chandu at the door of my house in the morning. He was dressed up in a white turban, a white rubber coat (a little too big for him, but nevertheless very splendid), a pair of pumps in which I could see my face reflected in clear silhouette, and he had a leather bag in his hand. He was setting off on his round and had come to show me how grand he looked in his new rig-out.

'Marvellous!' I said. 'Marvellous!'

And he rushed off towards the house of the landlord, whom he shaved every morning, myself following admiringly behind.

There were not many people in the street at this time. So I alone witnessed the glory of Chandu, dressed up as a doctor, except, of course, that he himself seemed rather self-conscious as he strutted.

up the street, carefully avoiding the taint of cow-dung cakes which the village women stuck to the walls, and the dirty water which flowed through the drains. But as we entered the home of the landlord we met Devi, the landlord's little son, who clapped his hands with joy and shouted to announce the coming of Chandu, the barber, in a beautiful heroic dress like that of the Padre Sahib of the Mission School.

'Ram! Ram! Ram!' said Bijay Chand, the burly landlord, touching the sacred thread which hung over his ear since he had just been to the lavatory. 'The son of a pig! He is bringing a leather bag of cow-hide into our house and a coat of the marrow of, I don't know, some other animal, and those evil black Angrezi shoes. Get out! Get out! You son of a devil! You will defile my religion. I suppose you have no fear of anyone now that your father is dead!'

'But I am wearing the clothes of a Doctor, Jagirdar Sahib,' said Chandu.

'Go away you, swine, go away and wear clothes befitting your low status as a barber, and don't let me see you practising any of your new-fangled notions, or else I will have you flogged!'

'But Rai Bijay Chand Sahib!' Chandu appealed.

'Get away! Get away! You useless one!' the landlord shouted. 'Don't come any nearer, or we will have to treat the whole house with the sacred cow-dung to purify it.'

Chandu returned. His face was flushed. He was completely taken aback. He did not look at me because of the shame he felt at being insulted before me whose hero he knew he was. And he rushed towards the shop of Thanu Ram, the Sahukar of the village, who kept a grocer's store at the corner of the lane.

Devi, the landlord's son, had begun to cry at his father's harsh words, and I stopped to quieten him. When I got to the head of the lane I saw the Sahukar with one end of the scale in which he had been weighing grain lifted in one hand, abusing Chandu in the foulest way. 'You little swine, you go disguising yourself as a clown when you ought to be bearing your responsibilities and -

looking after your old mother. You go wearing the defiled clothes of the hospital folk! Go, and come back in your own clothes! Then I shall let you cut my hair!' And as he said so he felt for the ritual tuft knot on top of his head.

Chandu looked very crestfallen, and ran in a wild rage past me, as if I had been responsible for these mishaps. And I nearly cried to think that he hated me now just because I belonged to a superior caste.

'Go to Pandit Parmanand!' I shouted after him, 'and tell him that these garments you are wearing are not unclean.'

'Ho, so you are in league with him,' said Pandit Parmanand, emerging from the landlord's home, where he had been apparently summoned to discuss this unholy emergency. 'You boys have been spoiled by the school education which you have got. It may be all right for you to wear those things because you are going to be a learned man, but what right has that low-caste boy to such apparel? He has got to touch our beards, our heads and our hands. He is defiled enough by God. Why does he want to become more defiled? You are a high-caste boy. And he is a low-caste devil! He is a rogue!'

Chandu had heard this. He did not look back and ran in a flurry, as if he were set on some purpose which occupied him more than the abuse which had been the cause of his flight.

My mother called to me and said it was time for me to eat and go to school, or I should be late. And she could not resist the temptation to lecture me again about my association with the barber boy.

But I was very disturbed about Chandu's fate all day, and, on my way back from school, I called in at the hovel where he lived with his mother.

His mother was well known for a cantankerous old woman, because she, a low-caste woman, dared to see the upper caste people as they never dared to see themselves. She was always very kind to me, though she spoke to me too in a bantering manner, which she had acquired through the suffering and humiliations of

sixty-odd years. Turning to me she said: 'Well, you have come, have you, to look for your friend. If your mother knew that you were here she would scratch my eyes out for casting my evil eye on your sweet face. And you, are you as innocent as you look or are you a sneaking little hypocrite like the rest of your lot?'

'Where is Chandu, then, mother?' I said.

'I don't know, son,' she said, now in a sincere simple manner. 'He went up town way and says he earned some money shaving people on the roadside. I don't know what he is up to. I don't think he ought to annoy the clients his father served. He is a child and gets funny notions into his head and they ought not to be angry with him. He is only a boy. You want to see him and go out playing, I suppose. Very well, I will tell him when he comes. He has just gone up the road, I think!'

'All right, mother,' I said, and went home.

Chandu whistled for me that afternoon in the usual code whistle which we had arranged to evade the reproaches of interfering elders that our association often provoked.

'Come for a walk to the bazaar,' he said. 'I want to talk to you.' And hardly had I joined him when he began: 'Do you know, I earned a rupee shaving and hair-cutting near the court this morning. If I hadn't had to come back on the back bar of Hukam Chand's carriage early in the afternoon, I should have earned more. But I am going to teach these orthodox idiots a lesson. I am going on strike. I shall not go to their houses to attend to them. I am going to buy a Japanese bicycle from the gambling son of Lalla Hukam Chand for five rupees, and I shall learn to ride it and I will go to town on it every day. Won't I look grand, riding on a bicycle, with my overcoat, my black leather shoes, and a white turban on my head, specially as there is a peg in front of the two-wheeled carriage for hanging my tool-bag?'

'Yes,' I agreed, greatly thrilled, not because I imagined the glory of Chandu seated on a bicycle, but because I felt myself nearer the goal of my own ambition; since I felt that if Chandu acquired a bicycle he would at least let me ride to town on the elongated

bolt at the back wheel or on the front bar, if he didn't let me learn to ride myself and lend me the machine every now and then.

Chandu negotiated the deal about the bicycle with an assurance that seemed to me a revelation of his capacity for business such as I had never suspected in him, from the reckless way he spent his money. And then he said to me in a confidential voice: 'You wait for another day or two. I shall show you something which will make you laugh as you have never laughed before.'

'Tell me now,' I insisted, with an impatience sharpened by the rhythm of the excitement with which the spirit of his adventure filled my being.

'No, you wait,' he said. 'I can only give you a hint at the moment. It is a secret that only a barber can know. Now let me get on with the job of learning to handle this machine. You hold it while I get on it, and I think it will be all right.'

'But,' I said, 'this is not the way to learn to ride a bicycle. My father learned to ride from the peg at the back, and my brother learnt to ride by first trying to balance on the pedal.'

'Your father is a top-heavy baboon!' said Chandu. 'And your brother is a long-legged spider.'

'I,' he continued, 'was born, my mother tells me, upside down.'

'All right,' I said. And I held the bicycle for him. But while my gaze concentrated with admiration on the brilliant sheen of the polished bars, I lost my grip and Chandu fell on the other side with a thud, along with the machine.

There were peals of laughter from the shop of the Sahukar, where several peasants congregated round the figure of the landlord. And then the Sahukar could be heard shouting: 'Serve you right, you rascally son of the iron age! Break your bones and die, you upstart! You won't come to your senses otherwise!'

Chandu hung his head with shame, and muttered an oath at me, 'You fool, you are no good!' though I had thought that he would grip me by the neck and give me a good thrashing for being the cause of his discomfiture. Then he looked at me, smiled embarrassedly, and said: 'We will see who has the last laugh, I or they.'

'I will hold the machine tightly this time,' I said earnestly, and I picked it up from where it lay.

'Yes, break your bones, you swine,' came the landlord's call.

'Don't you care?' Chandu said to me. 'I will show them.' And he mounted the bicycle as I exerted all my strength to hold it tight. Then he said: 'Let go!'

I released my grip.

He had pressed the pedal with a downward pressure of his right foot, hard, and, as the wheels revolved, he swayed dangerously to one side. But he had pushed the other pedal now. The machine balanced, inclining to the right a little, so that I saw Chandu lift his rump from the saddle in the most frightening manner. He hung precariously for a moment. His handles wobbled dangerously. He was tottering. At this juncture a mixed noise of laughter and sarcasm arose from the congregation at the shop and I thought that Chandu would come to grief with this confusion, if not on account of his utter incapacity. By a curious miracle, however, Chandu's feet had got into the right rhythm for pedalling and his handle had adjusted itself to his stiff hands, and he rode off with me running behind him, bursting myself with enthusiastic 'Shabashes.'

A half a mile run and he repeated the trick.

Though I was very eager to share the joy of his newly acquired skill, I didn't see Chandu the next day, as I was being taken to see my aunts in Verka, straight from school.

But on the third day he called for me and said that he would show me the joke he had talked of the other day. I followed quickly, asking the while: 'Tell me, what is it all about?'

'Look,' he said, hiding behind the oven of the village potter. 'Do you see the congregation of men in the Sahukar's shop? Try and see who's there.'

I explored the various faces and, for a moment, I was quite baffled.

'Only the peasants sitting round waiting for the landlord,' I said.

'Look again, idiot,' he said, 'and see. The landlord is there, his long-jawed face dirtied by the white scum of his unshaved beard.'

'Ha! Ha!' I shouted hilariously, struck by the contradiction of

the big thick moustache (which I knew the landlord dyed) with the prickly white bush on his jowls. 'Ha! Ha!' I roared, 'a sick lion! He looks seedy!'

'Sh!' warned Chandu. 'Don't make a row! But look at the Sahukar. He looks like a leper with the brown tinge of tobacco on his walrus moustache which I once used to trim. Now you run past the shop and call 'Beavers, beavers!' They can't say anything to you!'

I was too impetuous a disciple of the impish Chandu to wait to deliberate.

'Beavers! Beavers! Beavers!' I shouted as I ran past the shop to the edge of the platform by the banyan tree.

The peasants who were gathered round the shop burst out laughing, as they had apparently been itching to, for they had noticed the strong growths on the elders' faces, though they had not dared to say anything.

'Catch him, catch him, the little rogue!' shouted the Sahukar. 'He is in league with that barber boy, Chandu!'

But, of course, I had climbed up the banyan tree, from which I jumped on to the wall of the temple and shouted my slogan at the priest.

The rumour about the barber boy's strike spread, and jokes about the unkempt beards of the elders of the village became current in every home. Even those who were of high castes, even the members of the families of the elders, began to giggle with laughter at the shabby appearance of the great ones and made rude remarks about their persons. And it was said that at least the landlord's wife threatened to run away with somebody, because, being younger than her husband by twenty years, she had borne with him as long as he kept himself in trim, but was now disgusted with him beyond the limits of reconciliation.

Chandu did good business in town during these days and saved money, even though he bought new clothes and new tools for himself and gave me various presents.

The village elders threatened to have him sent to prison for his

offences, and ordered his mother to force him to obey before they committed him to the police for a breach of the peace.

But Chandu's mother had for the first time in her life touched the edge of prosperity, and she told them all what she thought of them in a language even plainer than that in which she had always addressed them.

Then they thought of getting the barber of Verka to come and attend them, and offered him an anna instead of the two pice they had usually paid to Chandu.

Chandu, however, had conceived a new notion this time, newer than those he had ever thought of before. Having seen the shop of Nringan Das, the barber of the town, he had applied his brain to the scheme of opening a shop on the wayside at the head of the bazaar, in partnership with his cousin, the barber of Verka, and with Dhunoo and the other barbers within a range of seven miles from his village. He proposed his new idea to his cousin and Dhunoo and all the other barbers at a special meeting of his craft, and, by that gift of the gab which he had, besides his other qualities of Head and Heart, he convinced them all that it was time that the elders of the village came to them to be shaved rather than that they should dance attendance upon their lords and masters.

'Rajkot District Barber Brothers' Hairdressing and Shaving Saloon' has been followed by many other active trade unions of working men in our parts.

Duty

THE midday sun blasts everything in the Indian summer: it scorches the earth till its upper layers crack into a million fissures; it sets fire to the water till the lakes and pools and swamps bubble, evaporate and dry up; it shrivels up the lives of birds, beasts and flowers;

it burns into one like red pepper and leaves one gasping for breath with a bulging tongue till one spends one's time looking for some shady spot for even the most precarious shelter.

Mangal Singh, the policeman who had been posted on duty at the point where the branch road from the village of Vadala enters the Mall Road of Chetpur, had taken shelter under the sparse foliage of a kikar tree beyond the layers of white dust, after having stood in the sun for five and a half hours since dawn. In a little while sepoy Rahmat-Ullah would come and relieve him, and he felt that he could cool down a little and prepare to go to the barracks.

The sun was penetrating even the leaves of the wayside trees, and there was not much comfort in the humid airless atmosphere, but after the crackling heat of the open, Mangal felt that this comparative shade was a blessing.

He was not, of course, like the delicate Lallas, rich Hindu merchants, who rode out into the gardens early in the morning and withdrew after 'eating' the fresh air at sunrise and never appeared till sunset, sitting in the laps of their wives drinking milk-water or lying sprawled about on the front boards of their shops under the cool air of electric fans. . . . No, he didn't say as they would: 'I go for a pice worth of salt, bring me a palanquin.' Nor could he 'quench his thirst by drinking dew.' No, he was proud that he came from strong peasant stock and was a hardy policeman who could rough it: indeed, this police service was not active enough for him and he felt it a pity that he had not become a real sepoy; for there was more pay in the paltans and there were better uniforms, also free mufti and free rations. So he had heard after he had put the mark of his thumb down and joined the police force—but once done cannot be undone. And it was the blessing of the Gurus, as there was little chance of earning any extra money in the military; while, apart from the fifteen rupees pay, there were other small sums so long as confectioners continued to mix milk with water and so long as there was a murder or two in the prostitutes' bazaar, and so long as there were respectable Lallas who would pay rather

than have their names mentioned. . . . Why, even here on point duty in the waste land—‘your own is your own and another’s is also yours.’ For if the peasants offered tokens of grain and butter and sugar to the Munshi at the customs house, then why not to the police? That skinny little Babu at the octroi post had not the strong arm of the sepoy to protect them when they were being looted by the thugs in the market. . . . He knew. After wisdom the club. If only he had been able to pay a nazar to the Tehsildar he would never have lost his land to Seth Jhinda Ram. . . . But God’s work was well done, man’s badly. And, truly, if he had not pressed the limbs of the landlord he would never have got the recommendation to join the police. And you learnt a great deal in the service of the Sarkar. And there was nothing better than service: no worry, and there was so much izzat in it that these very cowardly city folk who laughed at you if you were a peasant joined their hands in obeisance to you if you wielded a truncheon. And the rustics who had no notion of discipline or duty could be made to obey authority with the might of the stave, and if they didn’t obey that, the fear of the handcuff—even a daring robber like Barkat Ali could not escape because one could blow the whistle and call the entire police force out. And the Sarkar is truly powerful. Like Alamgir, it leaves no fire in the hearth, nor water in the jar, to bring a man to justice. . . .

He glanced at his dust-covered feet in the regulation shoes of rough cow-hide, even as he congratulated himself on his lucky position as a member of the much-feared police service and wished he had really been in the army, for there the sepoys had boots given them. His puttees too were old and faded and there was something loose about the khaki uniform with the black belt. The uniform of the army was so tight-fitting. Perhaps the whistle-chain and the truncheon improved this and the red-and-blue turban was nice, but—he lifted his hand to caress the folds of his head-dress and to adjust it, as it was heavy and got soaked with the sweat that flowed from his fuming scalp burdened by long hair on the lower edges. . . .

The sun poured down a flood of fire on the earth, and it seemed as if the desolate fields covered with dense brown thickets and stalks of grass and cacti were crackling like cinders and would soon be reduced to ashes. A partridge hummed in its nest somewhere and a dove cooed from the tree overhead, giving that depth to the shade which fills the air with long, endless silences and with the desolate peace of loneliness.

Mangal Singh drifted a few steps from where he was standing and halted on a spot where the shade was thicker than it was anywhere else under the kikar trees. And, blowing a hot breath, he cupped his palms over the knob of his stave and leaned his chin on the knuckles of his joined hands and stood contemplating the scene with half-closed eyes like a dog who rests his muzzle on his front paws and lies in wait for his prey.

Layers of white-sheeted mist floated past his eyes in the sun-soaked fields, the anguish of a thousand heat-singed bushes, while the parched leaves of the hanging boughs of the wayside trees rustled at the touch of a scorching breeze.

One breath, a thousand hopes, they say, and there never comes a day without evening—but it would be very difficult to walk down to the barracks through this terrible heat. And he wished his duty was not up, that someone could fetch his food for him and that he could borrow a charpai from the octroi and go to sleep in the grove of neem trees by the garden of Rais Jagjiwan Das, or sit and talk to the grass-cutter's wife who had breasts like turnips. Only Rahmat-Ullah had an eye on her too, and he was sure to be here, as he preferred the desolate afternoon, thinking that he might get a chance when no one was about.

'I will have to walk back to the lines,' he muttered to himself and yawned. He felt heavy and tired at the prospect and his legs seemed to weaken from the knowledge of the unending trudge of three miles. He shook his head and tried to be alert, but the invisible presence of some overwhelming force seemed to be descending on him and his heavy-lidded eyes were closing against his will. He took a deep breath and made another effort to open his

eyes wide through the drowsy stupor of the shade that weighed down from the trees. For a moment his body steadied and his eyes half opened. But how hateful was the glare, and how cruel, how meaningless, was life outside. . . . And what peace, what quiet below the trees, beneath the eyes. . . .

If a God should be standing here he could not help closing his eyes for a minute, he felt; and sleep came creeping into his bones with a whiff of breeze that was like a soft beauty retreating coyly before the thousand glares of the torrid sun which burnt so passionately above the silent fields. . . . The heat seemed to be melting the fat in his head and to be blinding his eyes, and he let himself be seduced by the placid stillness into a trance of half-sleep. . . .

Through sleepy eyes he was conscious of the whispering elements as he dozed, and his body still stood more or less erect, though his head was bent on the knuckles of his hand above the stave, and the corners of his mouth dribbled slightly. . . .

'Shoop . . . shoop . . . shoop . . .' a snake seemed to lash his face at the same time as he saw the soothing vision of a dim city through the stealthy corners of whose lanes he was passing suavely into a house was effaced. . . .

'Shoop . . . shoop . . .'

He came to suddenly and saw Thanedar Abdul Kerim standing before him, his young face red with anger under the affected Afghan turban, his tall lanky form tight-stretched, a cane in his hand, and his bicycle leaning against his legs. . . .

'Wake up! Wake up, you ox of a Sikh! Is it because it is past twelve that your senses have left you?'

Mangal reeled, then steadied himself, his hands climbing automatically to his turban which had been shaken by the Inspector's onslaught.

'Shoop . . . shoop,' the cane struck his side again and stung his skin like a hundred scorpions. And a welter of abuse fell upon his ears: 'Babin chod, the D.S.P. might have passed, and you are supposed to be on *duty*. Wake up and come to your senses, Madar chod!'

Quite involuntarily Mangal's right hand left the turban and shot

up to his forehead in a salute, and his thick, trembling lips puffed some hot stale breath: 'Huzoor Mai-bap.'

'You eat the bread of illegality,' the Thanedar shouted. 'I will be reprimanded and my promotion stopped, you swine!'

And he lifted his cane to strike Mangal again, but the sepoy was shaking with fright so that his stave dropped from his hand.

Mangal bent and picked up his lathi.

'Go and be on your point-duty!' ordered the Thanedar sternly and, putting his foot on the pedal, rode shakily away on his bicycle.

Mangal walked out of the shade, his shins and thighs still trembling and his heart thumping in spite of himself, though he was less afraid than conscience-stricken for neglecting his duty.

The heat of the sun made the skin of his face smart with a sharp pain where the perspiration flowed profusely down his neck. He rubbed his hand across it and felt the sweat tingle like a raw wound.

He shook himself and his head twitched, and he looked about in order to see if anyone had seen him being beaten. He wanted to bear the pain like a man. But his eyes, startled by the suddenness with which they had opened, were full of a boiling liquid that melted into fumes as he raised his head.

His throat was parched dry and he coughed with an effort so that his big brown face above the shaggy beard reddened. Then he paused to spit on the road and felt his legs trembling and shaking more than ever. He twisted his face in the endeavour to control his limbs and lunged forward. . . .

'Ohe, may you die, ohe asses, ohe, may you die,' came a voice from behind him.

As he turned round he saw a herd of donkeys come stampeding up the road in a wild rush, which became wilder as their driver trotted fast behind them in an attempt to keep them from entering the Mall Road at that pace.

For a moment the cloud of dust the herd had raised on the sides of the deeply rutted Vadala Road obscured Mangal's view of the man, but then suddenly he could hear him shouting: 'Ohe, may you die, asses!'

Mangal ran with his stave upraised in a wild scurry towards the driver of the stampeding donkeys, scattering them helter-skelter till some of them cantered the more quickly into the Mall and the others turned back and came to a standstill. He caught the driver up before the man had escaped into a ditch by the banana field. And, grinding a half-expressed curse between his teeth, he struck him with his stave hard, hard, harder, so that the blows fell edgewise on a donkey's neck, on the driver's arms, on a donkey's back, on a donkey's head, on the man's legs. . . .

'Oh, forgive, Sarkar, it is not my fault,' the man shouted in an angry, indignant voice while he rubbed his limbs and spread his hands to ward off more blows.

'You, son of a dog,' hissed Mangal as he struck again and again, harder and harder as if he had gone mad, till his stave seemed to ring as a bamboo stick does when it is splitting into shreds.

The Maharaja and the Tortoise

(To Roger Burford)

Of all the ancient (and, of course, noble) princely houses which have succeeded in preserving, by natural and artificial means, the continuity of their blood stream through the ages, the line of the Maharajas of Udhampur, of the Suraj-Bansi Clan who claim their descent from the Sun, by way of the God-King Rama, is the most ancient and most noble.

They are proud and warlike chieftains whose chivalry is a by-word in Indian homes, whose jewels and diamonds and rubies and sapphires and elephants are coveted by all the shopgirls of Europe, and whose splendid contributions in men, money and materials to the British Raj, in bringing law and order to India, have been recognized by the Sarkar through treaties which appoint

them the guardians of millions of the poor, and by the grant to them of various titles, certificates and scrolls.

Besides being confirmed a 'Descendant of the Sun' by special decree of the Government of India, on the death of his revered father Maharaja Gulab Singh and on his accession to the ancestral throne; His Highness Maharajadhiraj Sir Ganga Singh Bahadur was made Knight Commander of the Star of India (2nd class) for his services as an orderly to His Majesty the King-Emperor at the Coronation Durbar at Delhi. And he was awarded a salute of twenty-one guns for supplying a whole brigade of sappers and miners and for his valiant services in the field and at home during the War. The Hindu University of Hathras had conferred on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws for contributing lavishly to its funds and several women's clubs in America, and the Honourable Society of Haberdashers of the United Kingdom had elected him an honorary member. Besides these a long list of chosen letters of the Latin, Arabic and Sanskrit alphabets had accrued to his name during the years.

Be it said to the credit of His Highness that though he was gracious enough to accept all these honours, and had indeed in his younger days been eager enough to seek them, the superabundance of these titles, mostly couched in Angrezi speech which he did not understand, seemed to him irrelevant in his mature years, except as the necessary adjuncts of a modern existence, like the patent-leather shoes, and the eighteen-carat gold watch studded with diamonds, which he wore on special occasions with the ceremonial robes of the ancient and princely house of Udhampur.

For, in spite of his loyalty and devotion to the British Crown and his consequent assumption of the privileges that this devotion and loyalty brought in their train, His Highness had never really accepted the suzerainty of the dirty, beef-eating race of which even the Kings were used to wiping their bottoms with paper. He was a strict Hindu and, being true to the great traditions of his house and conscious that its eminence among the princely houses was founded more on the spiritual than the temporal power associated

with his ancestors, he valued only one title, 'Descendant of the Sun', and did not care for the other decorations.

In fact, as he grew in age, he had been inclined to care less and less for the things of this world and more and more for the things of the spirit. But, since the habits which he had cultivated in his hot-headed youth, and the responsibilities of his position as the head of his state did not altogether conduce to renunciation, he had compromised and accepted the appurtenances of a modern existence at the same time as he sought to deepen his faith in the invisible, ethereal God and to cast off the false cloak of the flesh.

Now, as every one knows, even the greatest saints and prophets of this world have found it difficult to achieve the ideal of complete detachment or non-attachment. The Lord Buddha who preached the cessation of all desire in order to rid the world of suffering died of meat-poisoning. And Jesus wept in vain. And Lao Tze suffered from pangs of bad conscience about his love of the world, and the gout.

It is not to be wondered at, therefore, if His Highness Maharaja Sir Ganga Singh failed in the pursuit of God. For this evil iron age imposes certain limits even on the most heroic sons of India! Hedged in between a diabolical Sarkar, whose real feelings about him were difficult to discover in spite of his intimacy with the Political Resident, Sir Francis Wimperley, and a people who were always clamouring for something or other, His Highness was in a doubly difficult position in realizing the great spiritual ideals of his inheritance.

The catastrophe which led to his disillusionment is one of the most important miracles of religious history in the world and has become a legend to all true followers of the faith, besides being the greatest spiritual crisis in the annals of Rajasthan since the Johur, the last sacrifice by the Rajputs when they were besieged in the hill fort of Chitore by the lusty slave King of Delhi, Ala-ud-din, and since the performance of Suttee by Queen Padmani, who burned herself with her female companions rather than yield to the conqueror.

It so happened that as Maharaja Sir Ganga Singh reached the age of forty and felt he was getting old he sought the advice of Pandit Ram Prashad, who was both the High Priest and the Prime Minister of Udhampur, to prepare an easy passage for his journey to the next world.

Pandit Ram Prashad, a clever little lawyer who had been able to maintain his position in the state for seven years—a longer term of office than had been enjoyed by any other Vizier, because he was superior in cunning to all the other courtiers—advised His Highness that, according to the holy books, on the appearance of every full moon, he should donate his weight in gold to the priests, entertain seven hundred of them to a feast in the palace and take to prayer, mentioning the name of God three hundred and seventy-five times on the rosary after offering oblations every morning to his ancestor, the Sun, seated in the lotus seat by the edge of the Ganges. If this ritual was not followed, said the Pandit, His Highness was in grave danger because, the access to heaven apart, he would have prolonged illnesses, as the planets Saturn and Venus were daily clashing in the scroll of his horoscope.

As the palace of the Maharaja of Udhampur was situated on the edge of the desert of Rajputana, and the River Ganges flowed about a hundred and fifty miles away up north, His Highness was hard put to it to understand how he could offer oblations to the Sun sitting by the Ganges water. But Pandit Ram Prashad had a more agile mind than His Highness, or, for that matter, anyone else in Udhampur. He immediately called Sardar Bahadur Singh, a contractor who paid the best commissions, and arranged the construction of a tank which was to be filled from the River Ganges by means of a pipe-line all the way from Hardwar, where the holy river first enters the plains from the hills. The cost was to be a meagre hundred and eighty lakhs. And he presented this plan to His Highness.

Needless to say, money was no consideration to His Highness Maharaja Sir Ganga Singh, as every one knew that he had given a hundred lakhs to the Sarkar during the war and had spent forty

lakhs on a fleet of Packards which broke their axles on the rutted, unpaved tracks of Udhampur and lay rusting in the stables. So that when Pandit Ram Prashad laid the scheme before His Highness he nodded assent even as his bleary eyes, yellowed by the smoke of opium, closed in a half-sleep and he sank deeper into the cow-tailed cushions, the carved silver handle of the long tube of his bubble-bubble dropping from his hand.

There is a sacred belief in India in a system of government called the Ram Raj. According to this the monarch is regarded as the father-mother of a happy family, which not only includes the male and female members of the royal household but even the dirty, ragged, lice-ridden common people of the kingdom. Since it was said in Udhampur that all the Rajputs from the Maharajādhiraj downwards were cousins who once belonged to the same clan, caste and race, the belief in Ram Raj in this state was most intense. But though the kinship on which this belief was founded was not too obvious during those resplendent feasts which were held in honour of visiting officials at the palace, it appeared on other occasions, especially at times of national emergency when the people were asked to give up their own occupations and help to increase the prestige of their spiritual and temporal head by dedicating themselves to some duty in the service of the state.

When the plan of building a tank by the palace and connecting it by a pipe-line to the Ganges, was conceived in order to enable His Highness to offer oblations and prayers to his ancestor the Sun, all the manhood, as well as the womanhood and even the childhood, of Udhampur was conscripted to help in the building and earn the blessings that would indirectly accrue to them through the Maharaja's realization of easy access to heaven.

Though there were some in Udhampur who thought the scheme fantastic, others believed that the Maharaja, who had once spoiled his religion by crossing the black waters and shaking hands with people who ate cow's flesh, and by whoring and drinking, was now returning in his old age to the right path. And they accepted a mere pittance from the contractor and willingly worked day and

night, sweating and straining, with the thousand names of God on their thirsty lips and the roots of wild plants in their bellies, to complete the work.

It did not take many months before the long line from Hardwar to Udhampur was laid and a beautiful square tank built, connecting the palace by means of three steps with the holy water.

With that large-heartedness which was characteristic of His Highness's family, capable of the uttermost hatred for the enemy and the tenderest solicitude for those who had won favour, the Maharaja had all those who had pooh-poohed the plan of constructing the tank flogged and banished, and all those who had helped in preparing the conditions through which he was to perform the prescribed ceremonies feasted. And there was some weeping in Udhampur, but also much rejoicing; and, as always happens on such occasions, the shouting and the laughter drowned the tears.

For a few days after these celebrations His Highness could not start practising the prescribed ritual of offering prayers and oblations to the father Sun, from whom he was descended, because it seemed difficult, after the feasts which were held on the auspicious occasion of opening the tank, to settle down to the serious business of praying every morning, especially as His Highness had never been an early riser, and also because he was not feeling too well after the effect on his liver of rich food during the banquets.

When a number of digestive powders had restored his liver somewhat, the Maharaja developed gout in his left foot, and that made it difficult for him to stir from the velvet cow-tailed cushions on which he reclined, swathed in bandages and Kashmir shawls.

This enforced delay in search of the kingdom of heaven fortunately gave His Highness time for some heart-searching as a preliminary to the prayers which he was soon going to undertake.

He asked himself whether the favourite young Rani, who had come in the palanquin sent by a prince of Nepal on the inception of the project for building the tank, was not right when she insisted that he should have his proud beard, which spread in two different directions at the chin, shaved off. Did it really make him

look old? And was it a fact that the Angrezi log considered a man young at sixty? If what General Bhola Singh, the Commander-in-chief of his army, had told him was true, that by taking a paste made of the powdered flesh of a male bear's organs one could rejuvenate oneself and even become the father of a child, then he had only to set his hunters searching for game and not despair or feel old at forty. . . . Why impose on himself the duty of offering oblations and saying prayers, anyhow, when one could easily get the priests to repeat the holy verses for a little money, or even get them to say that the feasting of a thousand priests or the bestowal of gifts to a shrine could ensure one's salvation? He had never learnt any sacred verses and formulas and, after all, what was he to say to the Sun if, indeed, he did go down to the tank at dawn and throw water skywards? The longer he reclined on the cushions and the more his gout pained him, the more such doubts and misgivings assailed him. And he twisted his beard between the forefinger and thumb of his left hand as he rested his head on his right. But a good mixture of opium and tobacco in the chilm of his bubble-bubble dispelled every thought and he succeeded in postponing the awkward decision for days on end.

But, for some curious reason, Pandit Ram Prashad kept on plaguing the Maharaja with inquiries about when His Highness was going to begin saying the prescribed prayers. Besides the clashing of the planets Saturn and Venus in His Highness's horoscope, said the Prime Minister, the construction of the tank and the pipe-line from Hardwar had almost emptied the State treasury. The only way of collecting new taxes from the peasantry was by sedulously persuading them to believe that His Highness's prayers would bring merit to the whole kingdom, as the prayers of no other person could. The fellow was so persistent that he nearly bit off the Maharaja's ears by his constant bullying and nagging. And he absolutely refused to point any other way of securing the advantages of heaven, although previously he had prescribed the feasting of seven hundred priests in every emergency as a way of getting out of the more arduous sacrifices.

The Maharaja's pretences about his indisposition, his ignorance of the sacred verses, etcetera, were met by the argument that by attaining purity of heart he would attain good health. And since His Highness could not confess that the real reason for his lack of pious zeal was that he wanted to have one last fling before he regarded himself as an old spent man, fit only for the mumbling of prayers, he found himself in a corner.

One day, indeed, he burst into a regal rage and declared that it was not necessary for him, the Descendant of the Sun, to pray in order to be taken into favour by his ancestors, and that no dog of a Brahmin could force him to renounce life at the age of forty.

But Pandit Ram Prashad respectfully assured him that if, after spending all the revenue of his state, he did not devote himself entirely to religion, and if he, the Prime Minister, was not given a free hand to rule the state in the best interests of the *praja*, he would have to declare the treasury bankrupt and beg the British Sarkar to force His Highness to abdicate and appoint a court of wards.

The Maharaja had no option but to submit to this threat. However, he sought a few days' grace from the Prime Minister on the plea that he wanted to learn the words of the *Gayatri*, the hymn to the Sun, before he started to pray, but really in an attempt to evade the ordeal should something happen in the meantime to make that possible.

Pandit Ram Prashad appointed a priest to come and help His Highness to memorize the *Gayatri*. And His Highness had perforce to listen to the recitation hundreds of times. Long before he had learnt the whole thing by heart he pretended that he knew it, as it was the only way he could keep the Prime Minister's abominable nominee away from the palace.

And at length the day was appointed when the Maharaja was to begin worship on the edge of the tank and to bring merit to himself and his subjects.

*With the beating of drums, the blowing of conches, the striking of cymbals and gongs and the tolling of bells, His Highness rose at dawn from the side of his favourite consort and, with his feet

swathed in bandages, for he still suffered from gout, he limped down the three steps which led from the balcony of his Diwan to the edge of the tank, where Pandit Ram Prashad and the other courtiers, priests and people had preceded him.

The eastern sky was colouring with a rosy flush as the resplendent visage of the Sun, the ancestor of Maharaja Sir Ganga Singh, showed up over the rim of the hills beyond the desert.

The whole congregation dipped themselves for a ceremonial bath in the sacred water. Pandit Ram Prashad, in his capacity of High Priest of the kingdom, then led the prayers...

The Prime Minister and the other priests would lift the holy water from the third step of the tank in their upturned palms and, showing it to the Sun, pour it before them to the accompaniment of the *Gayatri*.

The Maharaja followed them rather dreamily, as his eyes did not seem to have quenched their sleep during the night.

After the recitation of mantras was over, the congregation sat down in the lotus seat on the lowest step of the tank to repeat parts of the *Bhagvad Gita* and to contemplate the vision of God in their souls with closed eyes, as is prescribed by the rules of Hindu ritualistic worship.

His Highness was afraid that if he closed his eyes tight to contemplate God he might fall asleep and tumble into the water. So he had to be vigilant if only to keep himself balanced in his seat. As he kept opening his eyes and shutting them he saw what appeared to be a piece of round green moss floating among the flower-petals and the rice which had been copiously sprinkled by the congregation during the singing of the hymns.

The continual hum of the prayers recited by the priests became monotonous, and His Highness, catching himself half asleep, deliberately opened his eyes and scanned the landscape. Millions of his devout subjects, who had helped to construct the pond, were gathered all round, apparently happy to be sharing in this communion which he had graced by his presence.

Feeling that he might be observed he bent his head. The

curious piece of moss had now floated near to his bandaged feet, as if drawn by the dirty-looking green potion showing through the bandages which the barber of the palace had wrapped round his feet. His Highness could not move his hands to throw away the scum as he held them in the prescribed posture like the opening petals of the lotus flower on his knees. And yet he did not want the scum to stick to his gouty feet. He dared not move his body at all lest Pandit Ram Prashad should rebuke him for inattention afterwards. And yet he felt he must do something about it. In his panic he thought he could stir the scum away with a slight movement of his feet without attracting the attention of any member of the congregation or the priests. . . .

With one brisk little movement he stirred his left foot in the water and closed his eyes, sure that if he did not see himself do this no one else would.

But there was a sharp shooting pain near the big toe of his foot and he lifted his lids with a dazed look of horror in his eyes.

A little piece of pale brown flesh floated before him and a stream of blood was spurting from the bandages between his toes like a miniature fountain.

‘A tortoise! a tortoise!’ the priests shouted, and drew back with upraised hands and scurrying legs.

‘The tortoise has bitten off the Maharaja’s toe!’ a courtier shouted, lifting the piece of flesh from where it was sinking behind the disappearing tortoise.

‘Murder! murder!’ shouted another courtier.

‘Blood!’ shouted a third.

‘Keep quiet! keep quiet!’ shrieked His Highness, as he felt half afraid that the Prime Minister would rebuke him for ruining the ceremony by this unseemly behaviour and the millions of his subjects might regard this inauspicious accident as the harbinger of more trouble to come.

- But the frightened priests and the cowardly courtiers fled up the palace steps. And cries of Ram! Ram! Hari! Hari! arose from the throngs of people on the other sides of the tank. For every one

now believed from the pandemonium at the three steps that some evil had befallen the Maharaja.

With a resurgence of princely pride His Highness stood where he was and, though his face twitched and he went pale all over, he waved his arms in the gesture which signifies the casting of a blessing, in order to assure the people that he could maintain his composure even when his courtiers flew in a panic.

At this instant his own astonishment at his calm filled him with a greater degree of princely pride and he confronted Pandit Ram Prashad, the Prime Minister, who stood on the first step casting the shadow of his presence on the Maharaja, with an accusing stare in his eyes.

'Catch that swine! Catch that robber who has run away with my big toe!' the Maharaja shouted. 'Don't stand there looking at me! It is your infernal advice which has led to this.... I shall break your head if you cannot catch the culprit and bring it to justice!'

And, shaking his hands at the Prime Minister, glaring at the retreating figures, shouting, cursing, moaning and whimpering, he limped up the three steps, fainted, and fell face downwards on the marble floor.

The women of the Zenana came weeping up to the balcony and there was mourning in the palace as well as in the capital, as if the Maharaja were dead or dying.

But with a dauntlessness deriving from the Himalayan blood in her veins, the favourite Rani took His Highness in hand: she issued a proclamation to the people under her own name, giving a full account of the accident, and assuring the populace that the Maharaja was well on the way to recovery and would soon see that the perpetrators of the attempt on his life were brought to justice.

The Prime Minister now realized that his attempt to wrest control of His Highness's earthly kingdom by pointing out to him the advantages of the kingdom of heaven had failed. And recalling how even in the moment of his direst pain, when he had been bitten by the tortoise, the Maharaja had kept calm while he and the other courtiers had fled to safety up the steps, he now felt afraid of the

weak, opium-eating monarch whom he had thought as wax in his hand to twist as he liked. He did not know what kind of retribution the Rajput in His Highness would demand from him if he didn't produce the culprit tortoise. And yet what could you do to a reptile to revenge yourself? Have it killed? But there would surely be no satisfaction in that, as most of the water creatures had cold blood anyhow. Apart from the Maharaja's words before he fainted, however, the favourite Queen's behaviour was menacing.

He forthwith ordered the fishermen of the village to lay their nets and catch the tortoise which had bitten off the big toe of His Highness's right foot, and he offered the prize of a rupee to the man who would produce the reptile dead or five rupees to the man who would produce it alive.

It was not long that this prize remained unearned. For during the very next hour fishermen brought several tortoises, dead and alive, in baskets to the Prime Minister, who was hard put to it to discover which was the tortoise that had bitten off the toe of His Highness's right foot. And, for a moment, he was perplexed. But with that genius for inventing stratagems which is the secret of diplomacy, he had all the tortoises but one thrown back into the tank, and then he went to His Highness's presence, bowed obsequiously, and said: 'Your Highness's orders have been carried out. The tortoise has been caught. Would your Highness give the necessary command?'

Maharaja Sir Ganga Singh's princely pride, fanned by his favourite consort's care, had crystallized into a stubborn sense of hurt dignity. His Highness shouted to the Prime Minister:

'Bring this biti-chod tortoise before the Court and let it be tried before me and let a just punishment be meted out to it and all the other culprits! . . .'

It seemed a ridiculous thing for the Maharaja to want to try a tortoise in his court. But the Prime Minister was used to the strange and absurd whims of His Highness. He kept cool and had the tortoise brought into the court.

On seeing the reptile waving its head in the basket, His Highness ground his teeth in fury and, foaming at the mouth, exclaimed:

'Bring it up here so that I may trample upon it with the foot which it has disabled!'

'Sire,' the Prime Minister advised, 'it has sharp, knife-like teeth, and may bite off the whole of your royal foot.'

This restrained His Highness from taking the law into his own hands immediately. But he pompously proclaimed:

'We, Ganga Singh, Maharajadhiraj of Udhampur, scion of the Suraj-Bansi Clan, constitute ourselves as the supreme Judge of this court as well as plaintiff and prosecutor in this case. Let whosoever dares to come to the defence of this infamous tortoise, who bit our toe, speak in its defence. But be assured that if the guilt be proved against the said tortoise, then both the reptiles—the said tortoise and its counsel—shall be beheaded instantaneously in our presence.'

The redness in His Highness's eyes, as well as the cracked fury of his stentorian utterance, was obviously an attempt to imitate the violent and grandiloquent manner of public prosecutors in the fascist states which he had visited during his last European tour.

The Prime Minister came forward and said: 'I shall defend the culprit.'

There were whispers of pity, remorse and joy in the hall, as the noblemen, the courtiers, and the servants were sure that the bleeding, bandaged toe of His Highness was the surest proof of the guilt of the tortoise, and would, in being proved, involve difficulties for the Prime Minister since he had the temerity to defend the reptile.

'Acha then, proceed, you, dog of a Brahmin,' the Maharaja roared, confirming the worst fears of the audience, his anger taking force from the pain in his foot.

'You are my father-mother,' said the wily Ram Prashad without being ruffled by the Maharaja's abuse, 'as you are father-mother of the people of this land. But I have been responsible for encourag-

ing your Highness to have this tank constructed, and I have a plea to make.'

'Make it then!' said the Maharaja.

'Sire!' began the Prime Minister, adopting the familiar and timeworn method of flattery: 'Your Highness is a scion of the Sun and, therefore, the greatest and the mightiest Prince in the land. Your counsel is heard in far lands and your fame has spread into the farthest corners of the world, even in the lands of perpetual ice and snow where you have travelled. But Your Highness may be pleased to know that, according to the holy books, it is a sin to kill a Brahmin, and punishable by the consignment of the killer to twenty cold hells. Therefore I am free from attack from the highest as well as the lowest of the land.'

Having secured immunity for himself with the aid of Manu's four thousand years old code, which is recognized in part by the Government of India and of course as a whole in the native states, he proceeded to apply his peculiar religious-forensic knowledge to the defence of the tortoise.

'As for this reptile, the sages of old prophesied that the God Vishnu would be born in the iron age in the form of a tortoise and would be transported through an underground passage to a tank specially built for it by a Descendant of the Sun. And that, by the sacrifice of a toe of the said Descendant, the world would get the first sign that the God Vishnu, the antecedent of the Sun, had come to live in the old land of Rajasthan again. After that event the old ideal of Ram Raj, of a perfect kingdom, would be realized in the state....'

And he further stated that if His Highness would recognize this sign, and forgive those whom he considered his enemies, he would have the gift of a son and heir born to him by his youngest Queen and get a safe passage to heaven into the bargain. Otherwise, he said, a lifelong curse would descend upon the Maharaja: he would be made to abdicate and the Suraj-Bansi Clan would die out for ever.

'Incarnation of Vishnu!' mocked a courtier who had ambitions.

to the post of Prime Minister and therefore hated Pandit Ram Prashad and saw through his machinations. ‘Incarnation of the devil! That tortoise has disabled His Highness for life and it is made out to be the vehicle of God!’

His Highness’s vanity was flattered by the Prime Minister’s explanation. But, driven almost crazy by the pain of his injured foot, he sweated and blew hot whiffs of breath as he rolled about in a frenzy of indecision on the cushions on which he leaned.

‘I have fulfilled my mission in warning you of the portents,’ said Ram Prashad to make up His Highness’s mind for him.

‘What proof is there,’ said the courtier who was the rival of the Prime Minister, ‘that this is the tortoise which is, of all the tortoises in the tank, the incarnation of Vishnu?’

‘What proof is there,’ parried the Prime Minister, ‘that this is the tortoise which bit off the toe of His Highness’s right foot?’

The Maharaja seemed to be overcome by the Prime Minister’s logic.

‘To be sure Pandit Ram Prashad seems right,’ he said, scratching his beard. ‘For the portents as he described them tally with the legend that God appears to every scion of the Suraj-Bansi Clan.’

‘But, Sire!’ said the enemy of the Prime Minister, ‘what proof is there that the miracle would happen in this manner? Where are the holy books which lay it down?’

‘Pandit Ram Prashad is a holy Brahmin apart from being a vizier,’ said one of the partisans of the Prime Minister.

And there was a way of words, an exchange of fiery glances, and tempers threatened to rise, and were controlled only by the state of His Highness’s health.

‘What judgment should I pass in the circumstances, Panditji?’ asked His Highness reverently of the Prime Minister.

‘I would suggest that you order this tortoise to be taken back to the River Ganges whence it came,’ said the Prime Minister, ‘so that if, as I say, it is the incarnation of the God Vishnu, it will come back and manifest itself again.’

That course of action appealed to His Highness’s way of thinking.

If it was really the God Vishnu it would come back and do something to reveal itself, though he would not like it to do so in quite the same way as the last time; and if it was only a tortoise this would be the best way of getting rid of the nuisance and yet to save face after all the brave words he had used and been unable to act upon. His Highness therefore delivered judgment accordingly.

In the law reports of Udhampur state published by His Highness's Government, in emulation of the practice of England, where justice is mainly custom and precedent, the sentence reads as follows:

'We, Sir Ganga Singh, Maharajadhiraj of Udhampur, scion of the Suraj-Bansi Clan, Knight Commander of the Star of India (2nd class), etc., order that the tortoise in the palace tank, which is suspected of being either an arch-criminal or the incarnation of the God Vishnu, be exiled to the River Ganges for a year, so that it can prove its authenticity by a miracle of divine will,' etc.

During that year a tortoise bit off the five fingers of a washerman who was cleaning clothes by the tank, and a Son of God was born to the favourite Rani.

At the instance of the Prime Minister, His Highness the Maharaja declared a public holiday to celebrate the latter event. And every one believed that the God Vishnu had become incarnate in the old Maharaja and that Ram Raj had come to Udhampur, that it had become a perfect state.

On the Border

(To the Memory of Edward J. O'Brien)

SHE walked along the edge of a deserted millet field towards the molten lava of the copper-coloured Swat hills looking for a track where a herd of donkeys or goats might have passed. She had come out from the village in the scorching heat of the afternoon to collect

animal dung to burn for fuel, as, apart from an occasional tangle of thorns or rough scrub, wood was difficult to get for the earthen oven in her hovel amid the cluster of mud huts on the plateau. She looked this way and that, but could not see a sign of man or beast in the waste land within the range of her sharp hawk's eyes.

She stood for a moment on a promontory and, shading her eyes against the torrid glare of the sun with the inverted palm of her left hand while her right hand held the basket on her head, looked up to the hill tops for a bush, as she was sure that some donkey or goat would have strayed away from a herd, in spite of its driver, for a nibble among the thorns.

But there was no sign even of a blade of parched grass. Only the low hills unfolded their protuberant bellies before her vision, endlessly above the valley, blood-red and purple, and white where the misty haze of the earth arose to the even sky like a stifled, hot sigh.

She began to walk again as parts of her feet which touched the burning earth through the holes in the soles of her shoes chafed, the pads which she had made of those strips of paper, the machine birds had dropped on the village in the morning, having slipped out.

'He promised to bring back shoes for me,' she said to herself, with a fuming heart, 'and now he has broken all his vows.' For so it seemed to her, since she had not heard even a breath or a word from his own mouth through any of the men who had come back from Peshawar, except the rumour that he had been put behind prison bars by the Angrezi Sarkar for listening to the talk of the frontier Gandhi, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan.

A hot breeze cooled by the shadow of the basket on her head fanned her cheeks into the red flush of a pomegranate, and she strode along lighter at the touch of her memory, which was not so much a thought in words, but a feeling in her belly—a quivering of the nerves.

He did the most outrageous things: 'Karima, daughter of Abdul Rahman, whose cheeks are the envy of the pomegranate and the

rose. . . . ' He used to sing the refrain of the well-worn ballad, half teasingly, half menacingly, and then gather her into his embrace in spite of her protests, at any time of the day or night, when the fancy took him, and her cheeks used to get warmer and warmer till she felt they would burst with the burning.

And now she felt the ache of an emptiness in her belly, impalpable and intangible, like a thirst in the dawn. And now she felt the stirring of a dim memory of the rustling of her crumpled shirt and trousers as he crushed her in his arms, the subtle discomfort of the sudden ruffling and the disturbance of her ease that soon melted into the aura of a luxury. It left her suffused with the shame of a blush and the happiness of a deep, rich silence, uncannily like the silence of this wild, except that the hush of the land was interrupted by the whining of the flies, the humming of a corn-beetle somewhere. He was a devil whether he was at work in the fields, ploughing and harvesting, or at home.

He said the most outrageous things: 'Karima, daughter of Abdul Rahman, whose cheeks are the envy of the pomegranate and the rose, you are most seductive.' And when she had been carrying Ismat, and her belly had been a quivering warm little thing, soft to the touch, especially after she had poured several cans of cold water on herself at the well in the mosque and lain down for a siesta in the afternoon, and felt her unborn child kicking inside her, and complained of it to Shamus, he had said: 'Karima, daughter of Abdul Rahman, whose cheeks are the envy of the pomegranate and the rose, your child is jumping to get out. And I am sure that he will outdo his father in mischief and daring since he is so restless while he is yet the size of my seed in the ripe pear of your womb....' He was a fool.

She lifted her eyes from the head that was bent under the basket and scanned the hills again. From the liquefiant shades of her remembrance the form of her child emerged, soft and tender and fresh, with his father's smell about its little limbs lying beneath the pupils of her eyes, while the hard, bare earth blazed in a cruel fire before her gaze, glowing like the live coal in her earthen oven

among the cinders, covered with a coating of ash. She could not see a sign of man or beast, and she felt the panic of a smouldering rage and resentment rise in her bosom.

For Shamus had been away a year now, as the Ramzan fasts had just ended before he went. And he had been caught by the Sarkar and imprisoned, she didn't know for how long.

Oh, if only she knew, she said to the rocks; if only she knew she said to the silence; if only she knew that he wasn't dead, she said to the heavens in a trance. If only she knew, she said to herself, that he was still alive, she would go on working day and night for the Angrezi Sarkar, breaking stones on the road that the white men were taking into Waziristan.

But she brushed the delicate skin of her forehead which was covered with sweat and, shaking her colourful strips of rags as a hen shakes her feathers to ease her body from the clamminess of perspiration, she thought Shamus wouldn't like it if he knew that she had been working for a living, breaking stones for the white men. For it was rumoured that they were building this road in order to bring their soldiers to shoot the sons of Adam. But what could she have done? She had to live and keep the child. The tiers of land on the mountain-side which Shamus had ploughed for maize and millet were difficult for a woman to till, and the harvest of the year before had been exhausted before the spring. And she had taken this job, which was precarious, because the white men paid an anna a day for working from dawn to midday, and an anna and a half for working from dawn till night, besides which she and the other women who toiled thus had got a bad name in the village, and the Mullah was threatening to declare them heretics. But she had a clear conscience before the Prophet of Allah, because when one of the soldiers had whistled to her and given her a sly wink, she had flashed her scythe at him, and he had turned red and moved away, and since then all the soldiers said she was a tigress and never came near her. 'The father of Ismat will find me exactly as he left me,' she said, 'and I shall feed his child by any means I can, whatever the people may say. How big a boy he is already, and

mischiefous like his father. Surely he will be like Shamus in strength, with the black eyes and the hawk nose of his father. Now, he might have awakened in my absence, and I am still wondering . . .

She stood for a moment again at the edge of a rock and scanned the depths of a waterless ravine in which the particles of sand glistened like the sparks of lightning which sometimes flashed from the stones under her hammer. There was a pool of water somewhere here, she remembered, where the cattle came to drink. The rock on which she stood was hot, like the burning iron in the smith's shop, and she shifted her feet and glanced all round her impatiently. Perhaps the pool was behind the huge boulder, which looked grey and white. She would step down into the ravine and see if there was any dry dung there. There was a bush of berry trees, too, on a side of the ravine, and the goats—'Ah, by the grace of Allah, there were the droppings of a whole herd underneath the shadow of the rock!'

She jumped down, from the edge of the precipice on which she stood, to a foothold on another rock sharply cut like a slate.

There were holes in the clay crevices below the slate, and she was slightly afraid, because the fissures in these mountains often harboured snakes.

She descended a step and then, as if impelled by the sheer fascination of curiosity, she stopped, bent her head and looked into a hole, and probed it with her left foot.

A sharp, purring noise.

And though she was certain it was not from the hole into which she had probed, she went hurtling down into the ravine, jumping from stone to stone, in a hurry, and stood shaking at the base, her legs trembling involuntarily. And for a moment everything shimmered before her dizzy head, and she could only hear the hammer of her heart pounding at her breasts.

But from where she stood she couldn't help looking back to see if it was a snake or a wildcat, even though her legs were shaking beneath her, and her breath was held back in her throat against her will.

The purring noise now became a prolonged drone, and it was not from the hole in the crevices at all, or from the ravine, but from somewhere in the sky above.

She lifted her head and jumped up to the boulder from which she had descended, willing courage into her heart and strength into her body. She nearly slipped from the glazed stone, and, shaking like a leaf in a storm, missed a heart-beat. But then she scrambled up to the rock.

Against the transparent haze of the even sky where the sunrays trembled like the smoke of a furnace, droves of steel birds were wheeling like the ominous white eagles before the coming of the famine, and were excreting solid vessels of dung on the steppe.

Before she had breathed another breath one of the vessels struck the edge of the plateau near the house of Din Gul, the blacksmith, and burst with a terrific explosion, raising a cloud of dust into the sky.

The loud purr of the machines now became the reverberating sweep of an endless thunder, cracking up the heavens with such a sharp lightning that the Judgment Day promised by the Koran seemed to have come.

Another vessel fell with a mighty bang, louder than the breaking of a hundred pitchers, and tore up heavy mounds from the side of the naked earth into a spray like the spurt of water oozing from a broken fountain. And another, another, and another. . . .

Sharp and clear before her staring eyes, and behind them, the horror of the devastation wrought by the steel birds became incarnate like the dread of fire.

'My child, my child!' she cried in a voice that wouldn't rise above her throat. And she ran towards the village.

The steel birds had multiplied, and now dived from one end of the horizon to the other with a metallic, monotonous whine, like the hosts of the devil in the hell of a torn sky and an upturned earth, and the universe seemed to be engulfed in that long-drawn-out agony promised by the Prophet on the breaking up of the elements.

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But she could yet feel the earth under her feet, through the deafening roar and the clouds of dust before her dizzying vision.

She ran and ran till the taking of each step was an unendurable ache in her stiffening loins. She jumped over ditches and skipped over the desert of stones and boulders. She could not see the hundred yards that separated her from the mud huts. But she must get there though her body be torn into tatters; though her bones might break she must get there. If only she could take the distance in one long jump; if only she could roll down a hillock and cover the vast, unending distance! Oh, if only . . .

She tried to put determination into her failing legs by slowing down, but the bursting of another bag of pitchers held her heart, and the colossal shaking of the earth arrested her feet. And as she saw a rent as deep as a well before her, she stood stunned. Then she capered aside and rallied her trembling body into a furious rush, and went on, half moaning, half sighing: 'Oh, my child! Oh, my child!' And, as she ran, the bottom of hope was falling from the pit of her stomach.

A sudden resurgence of her will, and she stopped to breathe a few breaths. But the noise of cracking earth was frightening, and she lifted her head to the aeroplanes with an appeal in her terror-stricken eyes, with an abject wish that they should spare her and her child.

But before her now the mud huts were burning, smouldering, while here and there on the outer fringes they were in ruins. And men and women were running out, startled and terrified, stumbling and falling, seeking shelter behind huge stones and boulders, and dragging their wailing children behind them.

The steel birds came whining over the village again and swept the dark clouds of the rising smoke aside with the terrific detonation of more vessels of lead. She stopped once more against her will and looked up to the planes with a hatred that churned the bitter taste in her mouth into a white froth; she lifted her fists up to the sky with a wild movement of revenge, and then waited as if to see whether the force of her hatred had destroyed them. But the steel

birds purred across the valley from side to side, raining bomb after bomb on the neighbourhood. She moaned a terrible, helpless moan, that was a half-sob and half-shriek, and ran frantically forward, crying: 'My child! Oh, my child! Oh, save my child!'

'Stop there, the mother of Ismat!' shouted Abdul Mejid, the brother of the Mullah, who was shooting his powder-gun at the steel birds under cover of the potter's wheel.

But she rushed along as if she were drawn by the fear that a sudden darkness would envelop her eyes.

'Stop, you foolish woman,' Mejid said, extending his arm to bar her way.

But she struggled against the stiff muscles of his hand with all the resistance of her body, weeping without tears in her eyes, and crying a shrill wail: 'My child! Let me go! Oh, let me go and save my child!'

'The village is burning. Don't you see, mad woman?' shouted Mejid. 'Those sons of the Devil have annihilated it.'

'Let me go, let me go,' she wailed, and she bit his hand with her teeth.

He withdrew his arm as if he had been stung by a scorpion, and was left standing with an impotent rage that seemed to quench the energy of his flesh and congeal the blood in his eyes.

'By Allah,' he growled, 'they will not wipe out all the sons of Adam who are free.'

She had darted past Abdul Mejid into the smouldering ruins of the gully, only to find that the burning beams of the mud huts over the debris of ruined walls barred her way.

For the briefest moment she stood, afraid of jumping across the fire. Then she ground her teeth, closed her eyes, murmured Bismillah, and shot through the leaping flames.

She almost fell on a mound on the other side, but recovered her balance and ran, gathering her clothes about her and hissing hysterically.

A bomb burst ahead of her in the courtyard of the mosque; the

waves of fire swept aimlessly in places with a frightening violence; and the constellations in the sky seemed to hurl themselves on the earth in the final throes of a universe doomed to live in darkness after the angel Gabriel had finished his work of destruction.

But her feet were still firm on the earth through the lashing of the burning, scalding, suffocating heat. And as she stumbled from one bare mound of crumbling wall to another she was trying to see how her child would be lying among the ruins. From the scarred, jagged edges of all the broken houses it seemed certain that he must have been buried beneath the debris, and she involuntarily gave a piercing shriek as if she were looking at his dead body. But the dome of the mosque stood intact, and she would not believe her vision. After all, the roof of her hut might have escaped, and he might still be alive, though he would be crying. There, beyond the narrow alleyway. . . . She would donate sweet sugar on the shrines of all the Pirs if he were safe.

She saw, however, that the roof of her hut was burning, and one of the walls had caved in, while some of the woodwork was crackling.

She hesitated to look round, beckoning the courage of her will beyond the despair of her frightened body and mind. Then she rushed into the courtyard, her nostrils filled with the smell of smouldering cloth, her eyes smoked into blindness. She swung her arms forward to open the door and was met with an avalanche of fumes. But she dived into the hovel and groped towards the child.

The cot on which he lay was burning, and the child was red with whining, its fists raised into the air in the last struggle to clutch at something.

'Oh, my child, my son!' she sobbed, and fell upon him with a wild flourish of her arms, both out of love and with the desire to smother the fire if it had singed any part of his body.

Then she lifted him and turned, her head bent forward, her rump lagging behind.

The straw roof of the hut fell and barred the doorway.

She picked up an earthen water-jar which stood on the floor and hurled it at the debris of the fallen roof. But, beyond fanning the flames, the jar fell, extinguishing only a bare patch of fire, while the water flowed down singing.

There was nothing for it but to crawl through the hole made by the crumbling of the wall.

She hugged the weeping bundle of her child's flesh next to her breast, and said, as if he would listen: 'Don't cry, my babe, don't cry.' And then, covering him with her apron, she rushed forward.

Her feet caught the red-hot coal of a wooden pillar, and she shrieked. But she was already on the other side of the rent in the wall, with the child safe in her arms. She tottered as if she would give in, paled, but then she pressed the boy deep to her chest again, giving him a weak smile, as if to put courage into him and herself, and pushed forward through the courtyard. But she felt her apron burning. She bent and tore it off. It scorched her hand and caught her tunic even as she cast it to the wind. She rubbed her arm over the skirt, and smothering the flame, ran through the lane.

The mud huts were crackling and falling and the debris in the lane was afire with flames which soared to the sky, breaking up into shining particles like shooting stars, which fell away extinguished.

She looked back towards the mosque to see if she could escape through the alley that lay under its shadow. But now the dome of the mosque had fallen across the courtyard, and it was likely that the way was barred completely.

'Abdul Mejid! Oh, Abdul Mejid!' she cried, as she circled round and round in the trap. 'Oh, save my child!'

But there was no answer to her feeble voice among the voices of this hell, except the groaning of people in the adjacent houses, among the roaring of the flames of fire which wrestled for mastery with the thundering demons overhead, who had been let loose by Allah in recompense for the evil deeds of this ill-fated city.

With a shriek and a groan, she pressed her child fast to her bosom and rushed towards the end of the lane by which she had entered,

thinking that she would jump across the only beam that seemed to be burning there above the debris.

But, when she got within ten yards of it, she saw that a whole roof had fallen at the mouth of the lane, and the burning straw beneath the mounds of clay was flaring up wildly.

'Oh, Allah, where are you?' she cried, striking her head. 'Oh, Allah, hear my cry! Oh, Prophet of Allah, intercede on my behalf! Oh, Shamus!' And she rocked with hysterical cries, alone, unhearing and unheard. And then she stood, dazed by the fearful impenetrable curtain of fire that ridged her path, her body aching with the sting of the terrible, all-pervading heat, her head wheeling with the weakness that the breathing of volumes of odorous smoke had created. She looked down at her child and saw that he was fainting.

She jumped desperately across the ramparts of the fire, her mind struggling in the twilight of her eyes with the brittle dagger of her will. Her child jumped out of her hands and fell into the pit of the straw roof and lay across the flames, groaning with the torture of a heart that would not burn, weeping blood from the eyes that bulged out of their sockets, but would not close, sobbing a sob that would not choke him. . . . 'My child, my child, oh, my child!' she cried helplessly as she stood beyond the danger seeing her young one burn. Then she fell and alternately beat her fists against her brow and waved at the steel birds in the air, shouting: 'Sons of Eblis! Devils! . . .'

The Sons of Eblis seemed to stand fixed on the western horizon, remote and distant, after their magnificent dance in the air, as if they were witnessing with serene satisfaction the fire, the carnage, and the destruction they had let loose in the abyss of the nether worlds.

The Liar

(To G. Stuart Gelder)

LABHU, the old Shikari of my village, was a born liar. Therefore he had won the reputation of being the best story-teller in our parts. And though a sweeper of low caste, he was honoured by all and sundry. He was tolerated even to the extent of being given a seat at the foot of the banyan tree. And my mother did not insist too harshly on the necessity of my taking a bath to purify myself every time I had been seen listening to one of his uncanny tales with the other village boys.

Labhu was a thin, little man, with the glint of a lance and the glide of an arrow. His wiry, weather-beaten frame must have had immense reserves of energy, to judge by the way he could chase stags up the steep crags of the hills behind our village and run abreast of the bay mare of Subedar Deep Singh to whose household he was attached as a Shikari, except when some English official, a rich white merchant, or a guest of the Subedar, engaged him for a season. It was perhaps this wonderful physical agility of his that had persuaded him to adopt the profession of a Shikari. Labhu had also a sensitive, dark face of which the lower lip trembled as it pronounced the first accents of a poignant verse or the last words of a gruesome hunting story. And it was the strange spell that his tragic verses and weird stories cast on me that made me his devoted follower through childhood. He taught me to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds; he taught me the way to track all the wild animals; and he taught me how to concoct a cock-and-bull story to tell my father if I had to make an excuse for not being at home during the reign of the hot sun.

His teaching was, of course, by example, as I was rather a critical pupil.

'Labhu,' I would say, 'I am sure it is impossible to track any prey when you are half up the side of a hillock.'

'Acha,' he would say, 'I will show you. Stand still and listen.'

I did so and we both heard a pebble drop. Up he darted on the stony ridge in the direction whence the sound had come, jumping from crag to crag, securing a precarious foothold on a small stone here and a sure one on a boulder there, till he was tearing through a flock of sheep, towards a little gully where a ram had taken shelter in a cave, secure in the belief that it would escape its pursuer.

'All right,' I would say. 'You may have been able to track this ram, but I don't believe that yarn of yours about the devil-ram you saw when you were hunting with the Subedar.'

'I swear by God Almighty,' he said, 'it is true. The Subedar will tell you that he saw this terrible apparition with me. It was a beast about the size of an elephant, with eyes as big as hen's eggs and a beard as long as that of Maulvi Shah Din, the priest of the mosque, only not henna-dyed and red, but blue-black; it had huge ears as big as an elephant's, which did not flap, however, but pricked up like the ears of the Subedar's horse; it had a nose like that of the wife of the missionary Sahib, and it had square jaws which showed teeth almost as big as the chunks of marble which lie outside the temple, as it laughed at the Subedar. It appeared unexpectedly near the peak of Devi Parbat. The Subedar and I had ascended about twelve thousand feet up the mountain in search of game, when suddenly, out of the spirit world that always waits about us in the living air, there was the clattering of stones and boulders, the whistling of sharp winds, the gurgling of thunder and a huge crack on the side of the mountain. Then an enormous figure seemed to rise. From a distance it seemed to both of us like a dark patch, and we thought it was an oorial and began to stalk towards it. What was our surprise, however, when, as soon as we saw it stand there, facing us with its glistening, white eyes as big as a hen's eggs, it sneezed and ripped the mountain-side with a kick of its forefeet and disappeared. The mountain shook and the Subedar trembled, while I stood bravely where I was and laughed till I wept with joy at my good luck in having seen so marvellous a manifestation of the devil-god of the tribe of rams. I tell you, son, please God I shall show him to you one of these days.'

'Labhu, you don't mean to say so!' I said, half incredulous, though I was fascinated by the chimera.

'Of course I mean to say so, silly boy,' said Labhu. 'This is nothing compared to the other vision that was vouchsafed to me, praise be to God, when I was on the journey to Ladakh, hunting with Jolly John Sahib.' And he began to relate a fantastic story of a colossal snake, which was so improbable that even I did not believe it.

'Oh, you are a fool, Labhu,' I said. 'And you are a liar. Every body says so. And I don't believe you at all. My mother says I am silly to believe your tales.'

'All right, then, if you don't believe my stories why do you come here to listen to them?' he said, with wounded pride. 'Go, I shall never teach you anything more, and I shall certainly not let you accompany me to the hunts.'

'All right,' I said, chagrined and stubborn. 'I don't want to speak to you either.'

And I ran home bursting with indignation at having forced a quarrel upon Labhu, when really he only told me his stories for my amusement.

Labhu went away for a while on a hunting tour with the Subedar. He didn't come back to the village when this tour finished, because Subedar Deep Singh's eldest son, Kuldeep Singh, who was a lieutenant in the army, took him for a trip across the Himalayas to Nepal.

During this time, though I regretted Labhu's absence, I lent my ear readily to the malicious misrepresentation of his character that the Subedar and his employers, and occasionally also my father, indulged in; because, though superior to Labhu by caste, they were not such good shots as he was.

'He can only wait by a forest pool or a safe footpath to shoot at some unfortunate beast, this Labhu!' said the Subedar. 'And often he shoots in the dark with that inefficient powder-gun of his. He is no good except for tracking.'

'Yes,' said my father, 'he is a vain boaster and a liar. The only

beast he dared to shoot, at while he was with me was a hare, and even that he hit in the leg.'

I waited eagerly for Labhu's return to confirm from his very mouth these stories of his incompetence, because, though incredulous of this scandal, I had been driven to a frenzy of chagrin by his insulting dismissal of me. I thought I would ask him point-blank whether he was really as bad a hunter as the Subedar and my father made him out to be.

When Labhu came back, however, he limped about and seemed ill. I was very sad to see him broken and dispirited. And I forgot all the scandal I had heard about him in my bafflement at the sudden change that had come into his character, for he was now no longer the garrulous man who sat telling stories to old men and young boys, but a strangely reticent creature who lay in a stupor all day, moaning and murmuring to himself in a prolonged delirium, except that he occasionally hobbled out with a huge staff in his hand in the evenings.

I was afraid to go near him, because he always wore a forbidding, angry look. But the villagers didn't seem to think there was anything the matter with Labhu, as I heard them say: 'Now that we have no patience with him and his stories, he spends most of his time telling them to himself, the fool!'

I owed a loyalty to Labhu, for I had discovered a kinship in my make-up for all those extravagances for which the Shikari was so well known.

So I went up to him one day, as he lay on a broken string-bed near his mud hut, under the precarious shelter which a young pipal gave him.

'You have returned then, Master Labhu,' I said.

'Yes,' he said, 'I have been back some time, son. I looked for you, but you did not seem to be about. But you know, the man who is slain cannot walk even to his own house. This leg of mine pains me and I can't get about as I used to.'

'What happened to your leg, then?' I asked, realizing that he had forgotten all about our past quarrels and was as kind and com-

municative to me as before. 'Did you fall down a cliff or something?'

'No,' he said in a tired voice. And he kept quiet for a long while.

• 'What happened, then?' I persisted.

'You know, son,' Labhu began, at first pale and hesitant, then smiling and lifting his eyebrows in the familiar manner of the old days, 'I went away on a hunting tour in the pay of the Subedar's eldest son, Kuldeep Singh, and some of his friends. Well, we went to Nepal through the Kulu valley. They had no experience of hunting in this or in any other part of the world, and I led them across such trails as I knew and such as the local shikaris told me about. That boy, Kuldeep, I don't know what he does in the army, but he can't shoot at any range, and the Sahibs with him were clumsy, purblind white men. I would point to a beast with my stick, and, though they could see the hide before their eyes, they bungled with their guns or were too noisy on their feet, and away crashed the bull which we had been tracking. I would grunt, shrug my shoulders and did not mind, because they were like children. They had finished hundreds of cartridges and had not shot anything, and daily begged me to help them to secure some game.'

'At first I told them that game doesn't taste sweet unless it is shot by oneself. But at length I took pity on them and thought that I would secure them a good mixed bag. I shot twelve tigers with my gun and fifteen panthers in the course of seven days, and many stags.'

'On the eighth day we saw a monster which had the body of a bear, the head of a reindeer, the feet of a goat, the ~~tail~~ of a wild bull and a glistening, fibrous tissue all round it like the white silken veil which the Rani of Boondi wore when she came to visit Subedar Deep Singh's wife. Kuldeep Singh and the Sahibs were very frightened of this apparition and said it was the devil himself who had the shape of an earthly being and who would soon breathe a breath which would mix with the still air of the night and poison life.'

'They were all for killing it outright, while I was sure that it was only a princess of the royal house of Nepal who had been transformed by some magician into this fantastic shape and size. And I wanted to catch it alive and bring it home to be my bride.'

Labhu went on to relate how beautiful she was and how he resolved to restore her to her normal self by reading magical incantations.

'I told her I loved her,' he continued, 'and she smiled shyly. But some fool, I think it was the Subedar's son, fired a volley of shots, which frightened her so that she ran, became one with the air and began to ascend the snowy peaks of Kailash Parbat.

'I was bent on rescuing my beloved, and I leapt from one mountain to another, calling after her to stop. But that idiot Kuldeep and the Sahibs kept on shooting and roused the magician who kept guard over her. And this evil sage threw a huge mountain of snow at me to kill me.

'I just blew a hot breath and the mountain of snow cracked into a million pieces and hung about the sky like glittering stars.

'Then the magician struck the earth with his feet and opened up a grave to bury me alive. I leapt right across the fissure and found myself on a peak in the land of the lama who never dies.'

'By now, of course, the magician had hidden the beauty away in some cave. So I gave up the chase, as there was the doom of death about this beauty, anyhow, and I made one leap across the Himalayas for home. . . .'

'And as you landed this side of the mountains you sprained your foot,' I said.

Labhu lifted his eyebrows funnily in the manner of the old days and, laughing, said: 'Have I told you this story before, then?'

A Rumour

(To Kanwar Brajesh Singh of Kalakanakar)

'How far be the town of Bariwal from here, brother?' Dhandu asked a man who sat by a small sweet stall on the roadside. And while the stall-keeper lifted his dreamy head from where it lay in his interlocked arms, Dhandu mopped the sweat off his black, burnt forehead with the five stubby fingers of his right hand, phewed a hot breath from under his white drooping mustachios, and scratched the bristles of a day's growth of white beard.

'Only a mile,' the stall-keeper murmured.

It seemed to be a mile from everywhere, and, during the three days he had been walking, the miles had seemed to be endless.

'I be from the village of Deogarh,' Dhandu volunteered the information to the sleepy stall-keeper, apologetically, 'a carpenter by trade. . . . And I be going to the mill at Bariwal, brother.'

The stall-keeper skimmed the sugar-coated gram, which lay covered with a swarm of flies on the huge iron plate by his side, with his hand, and then looked at Dhandu. But old Dhandu still had some of the gram which his wife had roasted for him to take on his journey, in the bundle on his back, and he did not feel justified in making any extravagant purchases until he had got the job in the mill. He sheepishly withdrew his eyes from the stall and began to walk away.

The winding road was already glowing red-hot under the sun and the small stones and splinters on its frayed edge got into the cracks of his bare heels. He felt guilty that he hadn't hurried to his destination before the sun soared too high. But the dawn had been so cool, and his old, weary limbs couldn't shake off the sleep. And then he had stayed to rub his forehead at the temple, as this was the morning on which he had to buy work, and he needed the blessings of the Gods. . . . 'Ram, Ram, Ram,' he muttered the name of God, lest Divine Grace be withdrawn from him for grudging the time he had spent in prayer, and he moved along the dusty

fringe of the road with considerable alacrity. As he walked he looked away into the wheat fields in the shallow valley, by the roadside. What fields! Small, weak, spindling stems, one hand high, with hardly any ears of corn!

For a moment the scorching rays of the sun, slanting on the road, blinded him, and he could see only some vultures perched on the hillside by the carcase of an ass, their twisted beaks shining like bright silver in the glare.... But, there before him, down the road, was the town: tall, brick-built houses, and small brick-built houses, and squat, flat-roofed mud huts and uneven thatched cottages and onion-domed mosques and conic temples like the mountain peaks, and a higher tower that fumed at the sky....

Dhandu hurried, almost as if his feet were being impelled by an increased eagerness to reach the town and devour everything that was in it.

Suddenly there was the clanging of vehicles on his right, the raucous loud bellowing of horns, more noisy than the sound of snaky bugles which the ascetics blew at the shrine of Durga Devi at the festival of Kali in Bilaspur, the shouting and yelling of men behind him, accompanied by the tinkling of bells and the rattling of cane sticks on the wheels of carriages.

Dhandu blinked his eyes and saw that he had walked right into the crossroads and was, with an obstinate calf which stood munching at a bundle of greens it had pilfered from a vegetable stall, the cause of all the pandemonium.

Smiling and impervious to the abuse, the ridicule and the laughter of the drivers, the tonga-wallahs and the pedestrians, he lifted his legs with a love of life which surprised even he who had often forsaken himself to the tender mercies of Bhagwan, who had, indeed, wished, during the latest disgrace of his life, to die. And he got on to the side of a jostling crowd of tall villagers dressed in long homespun tunics and tehmets, and small townsmen, dressed in muslins, who chewed betel leaf galore, and Babus who wore kotpatloons, and boat-like caps on their heads.

For a moment he stood bewitched, looking at an enormous red

charabanc. He wished he had learned to mend these 'motus' instead of sticking to carpentry all his life. But they were made in Vilayat, it was said; and perhaps you had to go across the seas to learn to repair them. . . . 'Better that I should get this job and arrange to call Sukhdevi. Bisheshwar, the weaver, said there were plenty of jobs for skilled workmen in the mill, and the pay was as much as a Babu earned. . . . But where is the mill? I must ask the way. . . .'

As he furtively raised and lowered his dim eyes he felt that every one was intent on his own errand. He looked around to make sure again. No one was interested in him—except the pan-biri wallah who was beckoning him . . . Or was he just sprinkling water on the betel leaves spread under the wet rag? He contemplated the parting of the stall-keeper's well-oiled hair and the large freckled looking-glass, which occupied half his shop, beneath the bright picture of Krishan ji Maharaj, dancing on the crest of a cobra, studded with stars. 'Shall I go in and ask, for an hour's shame brings a day's rest. . . .'

'Where be the mill, brother? Bariwal woollen mill?' he asked in a whisper, rushing up with alacrity and joining hands and twisting his lips under the thick mustachios with an abject humility.

'Keep aside, keep aside, it is early in the morning!' shouted the pan-biri wallah.

'I be from the village of Deogarh. . . .'

'Pass on, pass on, it is early in the morning and I can't give you a pice. I have hardly yet made my bonnee and you beggars—'

'I am not a beggar—'

'Oh, go, don't make a row, early in the morning, Baba, I have told you once and for all, go!'

'Where be the mill, brother?' Dhandu pleaded. 'I be from the village of Deogarh and I heard a rumour—'

'Oh, you want to go to the mill; you have heard a rumour that there is a job waiting for you there?' said the pan-biri wallah in an even voice which only half betrayed his cynicism. 'Go along .

by the fruit market there, see? The big gate in the high wall, studded with gems. . . .

Dhandu murmured gratitude with joined hands and plunged into the road, elated by the cheery manner of the pan-biri wallah.

'His end has come, darting into the road like that!' said the pan-biri wallah to the owner of a neighbouring cookshop, after him.

But the road was clear at that instant except for a group of peasants who stood listening to the voice from a box outside a shop, by the opening of the fruit market. Dhandu entered a square, past the puddle of buffalo urine in the passage. Some sweating coolies were unloading baskets of mangoes in the shops. He had eaten plenty of mangoes at home but never had the fruit smelt so sweet to Dhandu's senses as in this market. Oh, the varieties of it! In the hills the mangoes were so small because the same old trees had to bear fruit year after year and no new cuttings were planted.. He would have loved to have tasted one of these which looked like Sukhdevi's breasts before she had had her son. . . . But if the mill was so near the fruit market he would be coming here every day. The pan-biri wallah seemed to have heard of the rumour. 'May God bless his auspicious words,' he muttered to himself and pushed ahead till he came to the corner of the fruit market where he thought was the opening leading to the mill. He could see the tall chimney of the factory beyond the stalls, but he could not see an opening.

He decided that he would ask someone the way again.

Little groups of men crouched, sat and slept on the straw in the shadow of the carts. One coolie near him was looking for lice in the seams of his tunic, which he had spread out on his knees while his bare body streamed with sweat; another was pulling lustily at a coco-nut basined-hookah; a third looked greedily towards some cart-drivers who were beating cream cakes for a cool drink in an earthen pitcher; and a fourth groaned uncannily as he slept. . . .

'Where be the way to the mill, brother?' Dhandu asked.

No one answered and all the men remained intent on their pre-occupations, since the question had merely been whispered to the

different strata of smell in the overloaded air of the market, rather than to any person.

'I be from the village of Deogarh, brother, and I heard a rumour that there is a job for skilled workmen hereabouts. You be hill-men, too, brothers?'

The coolie who was smoking suddenly laughed a laugh which spluttered into a cough as it got caught in the smoke which he inhaled. And the other men looked up at Dhandu as much as to ask: 'Are you mad?'

'Don't laugh at one who is old enough to be your father,' said the man who was looking for lice to his companion.

'The old fool! Fancy coming here where the coolies of the whole world have descended and crowded each other out!' said the man who was smoking.

'Go, go, Baba, there is your way,' the third man said wearily. 'Don't mind these bastards. You should have gone by the main road, but there is a short cut through that lane.'

'Acha, son,' Dhandu said. 'Will the jackal's cry kill the buffalo or the abuse of an angry man damage my soul?' And he proceeded.

There, he could see the tall chimney of the mill talking to the sky behind the irregular houses by the godowns—where was the lane?

He walked through the market which swarmed with men and beasts of burden and carts and sacks and buzzing flies and wasps, till he could see the narrow opening of an alley-way with a folding iron door which was ajar.

'It is no shame to eat one's own bread or to earn it,' he said to assure himself before approaching the great doors of the factory. The spiked grandeur of the iron gateway towered above him and he felt small and irrelevant before the fine cock of a Pathan who stood dressed in a green drill uniform with a gun in his hand and a belt of cartridges round his chest.

He hesitated a little and scratched his beard to screw up courage. There was no one about, and the sentry had seen him. So he advanced, his head bent and his feet hitting against each other. His

son had told him that it was the natural custom among the Pathans to salaam and not to join hands. He gingerly put his hands to his head and said:

'Salaam, Khan, I heard a rumour that there is a job for a skilled workman in the mill. I be from the village of Deogarh, a carpenter by caste.'

'Who told you the rumour?' said the Pathan, standing rigidly where he was, without the flicker of an eyelid.

'Bisheshwar Singh, a man from my village who worked here, said so, Hajoor.'

'Ah, Basheshwar Singh! You are the friend of Basheshwar Singh?' said the Pathan, without changing his tone.

Dhandu's hopes, which had been slightly chilled by the laughter of the coolie in the fruit market, arose to see that the sentry knew Bisheshwar Singh. 'Han,' he continued, 'Bisheshwar Singh said that there is good money for a skilled worker in this mill.'

'Ah, Basheshwar Singh said so, eh? Basheshwar!' the Pathan iterated, grinding his words first softly, then hard, after which he smiled a good-humoured smile. 'Basheshwar Singh, the son of a dog! Basheshwar Singh! The seed of a donkey! . . .'

'You remember him then, Khan?' Dhandu asked, thinking that the Pathan was abusing Bisheshwar affectionately, as is the custom among intimate friends in Hindustan.

'Who doesn't know Basheshwar Singh?' the Pathan said, curling his lips like a viper. 'He was the ringleader of the strike in this mill and I would have murdered him like this.' He raised the forefinger of his right hand to his neck and then made the noise which the knife makes in butchering the neck of a goat. 'I would have murdered him if Dastur Sahib had not prevented me. The illegally begotten Basheshwar! Rape of his mother! Where is he? I have to settle a feud with him! Where has he retreated—back to his mother? Rape of his sister! He and his associates beat me, beat me in the strike. And they stopped the mazdoors from paying me the interest as well as the principal. Dastur Sahib, the coward, suspended him before I came out of hospital, otherwise Basheshwar and his

life would have parted company.... But he does not know that a Pathan never forgets....' And he rubbed the five fingers of his right hand over his face and took the ceremonious vow of vengeance.

'What does a strike mean, Khan?' Dhandu asked, to allay the Pathan's wrath before asking him for the job, for he still harboured a naïve faith.

'Oh, do you joke with me?' the Pathan shouted. 'What means a strike? Has that illegally begotten sent you here to start trouble again? I shall shoot him if I see him—Labour Commissioner or no Labour Commissioner! And if you value your life, go your way!'

'But, Khan, I don't know Bisheshwar,' Dhandu said, with joined hands. 'I only heard the rumour in the village and I had lost my home and implements through the working of fate, so I came here, a three days' journey from my village, Deogarh; and I be a carpenter by trade....'

'You heard a rumour, eh, a rumour?' said the Pathan, craning his neck forward. 'The son of a donkey, a rumour!' And he laughed a crackling crow's laugh. 'A rumour! The sinews of an owl! A rumour!'

'Khan... is it not?...'

'Go, son of Khan, how can it be true!' the Pathan said, with a gurgle in his throat. 'Dastur Sahib has sacked a number of mazdoors because the mill will soon go on short work.'

'But, Khan,' Dhandu persisted.

'Go, go, there are no jobs,' shouted the sentry, with a resurgence of anger. 'Go, son of Bisheshwar, the gandu. Go, or I shall hand you over to the police! Go!' And he shook the double-barrelled gun and stamped his feet.

The violence of the Pathan's manner lifted the scales from Dhandu's dim, hopeful eyes and he saw that there was no getting past this sentry into the factory, as there was no passing through the hard wood of its gate or across its high walls with the broken glass studded on its cemented edges. For a moment he stood thinking that he could join his hands to the sentry. But the Pathan stood pulling himself to his full height, hard as a rock. Dhandu couldn't

even lift his eyes to see. The thing before him, the wood of the door, the spikes on its crest, the pillars which supported the doors, even the shadow of the gateway seemed to weigh down on his brain. He hung his head, not daring to look up to the pendent strength of the gigantic objects about him.

'Go!' the sentry shouted again and stamped on his feet.

Dhanlu jumped and then began to walk away like a dog with his tail between legs, looking furtively back to see if the Pathan was following him.

His throat was parched; his legs trembled and seemed to sink beneath him; his whole frame, hardened by the toil of years, seemed to have grown suddenly numb. . . .

He looked emptily before him as if he were walking through a void, completely unconscious of the sweat trickling through the rivulets of the furrows on his head, across his eyes, across his bearded cheeks, across his nose to the lips, the chin and the neck. Fascinated by the fear of the Pathan he wanted to glance back again towards the gate of the factory, but his courage failed him.

'A rumour! A rumour! Only a rumour!' The thought tolled at the back of his brain like the echo of some distant thunder.

And he walked along dazed.

'So there were no jobs,' he muttered to himself as he stood still some distance from the scene of his humiliation. 'What was a strike, and what had Bisheshwar Singh done?' he asked himself, turning back to see if he was out of the danger zone. But there was no answer to these questions in his brain. As he cast another glance backwards he still felt dangerously near the factory gate. To get farther away from the hateful, unapproachable factory, however, and feeling that it would be easier if he kept on the move, he resumed his way.

He felt as if he were journeying at an ant's pace through a sandy desert, breathless and choked with the heart; his life seemed a heavier burden than he had ever carried. . . . He had felt like this once or twice when he had the ague as a child, helpless and weighed down as if he could sink wherever he dropped if he let himself go, released

the hold on himself. But then he had recovered from these illnesses and floated like a leaf in the hills, and he had gone adventuring into the fields without shirking work. Now, however . . .

'Ohe, get out of the way, ohe, get out of the way!' a cart-driver shouted, while he strained at the buffalo to stop the cart.

Dhandu became aware that he had stopped still without knowing that he had stopped.

He edged out of the way and tried to summon some thought which could illumine the darkness in his eyes. But no thoughts came into his head, only the feeling that he was just drifting along, knowing not where to go in this strange city, far away from his village, alone, without any friends or relations.

'Honk! Honk!' The horn of a lorry barked as it came from a side street.

• 'Ohe, get aside, hurry, hurry, ohe, ohe, ohe . . .' the policeman on point-duty called.

• 'A rumour! So it was only a rumour, a rumour!' Dhandu continued to murmur self-pityingly in the empty shell of his brain, heedless of the calls. 'And Bisheshwar said every mazdoor gets thirty rupees . . . and Angrezi houses to live in, and meat to eat instead of lentils and rice—and there was really no . . .'

'Honk! Honk!'

• 'A rumour . . .'

But the lorry from behind, in trying to avoid a headlong crash with the bullock-cart, had skirted round the road and knocked him down.

Instinctively he rolled, five, six times, the deafening roar of the engine, the shouts, the horns urging him on. But the inexorable wheels of the lorry, unchecked by the brakes, ran over him, crushing his ribs.

He put his hands to his heart and opened his mouth to shriek, but no sound came, though his heart was beating loudly. There was a sudden panic in his hot flesh.

What had happened?—was he dead?

His arms fell on his sides, the toes of his feet were severed clean.

from their joints and the entrails showed over the mess, torn from his insides. He strained his will in a brave effort to rise again, but he couldn't.

He waited patiently without a cry, as though if he remained cool and fearless death would be warded off. But in the dusty heat of the forenoon his blood flowed and, before the people could drag him out from under the lorry, he was dead.

A rumour reached Deogarh some months later that Dhandu, the old carpenter of the village, had become a resident of the celestial heavens.

A Pair of Mustachios

THERE are various kinds of mustachios worn in my country to mark the boundaries between the various classes of people. Outsiders may think it stupid to lay down, or rather to raise, lines of demarcation of this kind, but we are notorious in the whole world for sticking to our queer old conventions, prides and prejudices, even as the Chinese or the Americans, or, for that matter, the English. . . . And, at any rate, some people may think it easier and more convenient to wear permanent boundary-lines like mustachios, which only need a smear of grease to keep them bright and shiny, rather than to wear frock coats; striped trousers and top hats, which constantly need to be laundered and dry-cleaned, and the maintenance of which is already leading to the bankruptcy of the European ruling classes. With them clothes make the man, but to us mustachios make the man. So we prefer the various styles of mustachios to mark the differences between the classes. . . .

And very unique and poetical symbols they are too. For instance, there is the famous lion mustache, the fearsome upstanding symbol

of that great order of resplendent Rajas, Maharajas, Nabobs and English army generals who are so well known for their devotion to the King-Emperor. Then there is the tiger mustache, the uncanny, several-pointed mustache worn by the unbending, unchanging survivals from the ranks of the feudal gentry who have nothing left but the pride in their greatness and a few mementoes of past glory, scrolls of honour, granted by the former Emperors, a few gold trinkets, heirlooms, and bits of land. Next there is the goat mustache—a rather unsure brand, worn by the nouveau riche, the new commercial bourgeoisie and the shopkeeper class who somehow don't belong—an indifferent, thin little line of a mustache, worn so that its tips can be turned up or down as the occasion demands a show of power to some coolie or humility to a prosperous client. There is the Charlie Chaplin mustache worn by the lower middle class, by clerks and professional men, a kind of half-and-half affair, deliberately designed as a compromise between the traditional full mustache and the clean-shaven Curzon cut of the Sahibs and the Barristers, because the Babus are not sure whether the Sahibs like them to keep mustachios at all. There is the sheep mustache of the coolies and the lower orders, the mouse mustache of the peasants, and so on.

In fact, there are endless styles of mustachios, all appropriate to the wearers and indicative of the various orders, as rigorously adhered to as if they had all been patented by the Government of India or had been sanctioned by special appointment with His Majesty the King or Her Majesty the Queen. And any poaching on the style of one class by members of another is resented, and the rising ratio of murders in my country is interpreted by certain authorities as being indicative of the increasing jealousy with which each class is guarding its rights and privileges in regard to the mark of the mustachio.

Of course, the analysis of the expert is rather too abstract, and not all the murders can be traced to this cause, but certainly it is true that the preferences of the people in regard to their mustachios are causing a lot of trouble in our parts.

For instance, there was a rumpus in my own village the other day about a pair of mustachios.

It so happened that Seth Ramanand, the grocer and moneylender, who had been doing well out of the recent fall in the price of wheat, by buying up whole crops cheap from the hard-pressed peasants and then selling grain at higher prices, took it into his head to twist the goat' mustache, integral to his order and position in society, at the tips, so that it looked nearly like a tiger mustache.

Nobody seemed to mind very much, because most of the mouse-mustached peasants in our village are beholden to the banya, either because they owe him interest on a loan, or an instalment on a mortgage of jewellery or land. Besides, the Seth had been careful enough to twist his mustache so that it seemed nearly though not quite like a tiger mustache.

But there lives in the vicinity of our village, in an old, dilapidated Moghul style house, a Mussulman named Khan Azam Khan, who claims descent from an ancient Afghan family whose heads were noblemen and councillors in the Court of the Great Moghuls. Khan Azam Khan, a tall, middle-aged man, is a handsome and dignified person, and he wears a tiger mustache and remains adorned with the faded remnants of a gold-brocaded waistcoat, though he hasn't even a patch of land left.

Some people, notably the landlord of our village and the money-lender, maliciously say that he is an impostor, and that all his talk about his blue blood is merely the bluff of a rascal. Others, like the priest of the temple, concede that his ancestors were certainly attached to the Court of the Great Moghuls, but as sweepers. The landlord, the moneylender and the priest are manifestly jealous of anyone's long ancestry, however, because they have all risen from nothing, and it is obvious from the stately ruins around Khan Azam Khan what grace was once his and his forefathers. Only Khan Azam Khan's pride is greatly in excess of his present possessions, and he is inordinately jealous of his old privileges and rather foolish and headstrong in safeguarding every sacred brick of his tottering house against vandalism.

Khan Azam Khan happened to go to the moneylender's shop to pawn his wife's gold nose-ring one morning and he noticed the upturning tendency of the hair on Ramanand's upper lip which made the banya's goat mustache look almost like his own tiger mustache.

'Since when have the lentil-eating shopkeepers become noblemen?' he asked surly, even before he had shown the nose-ring to the banya.

'I don't know what you mean, Khan,' Ramanand answered.

'You know what I mean, seed of a donkey!' said the Khan. 'Look at the way you have turned the tips of your mustache upwards. It almost looks like my tiger mustache. Turn the tips down to the style proper to the goat that you are! Fancy the airs of the banyas nowadays!'

'Oh, Khan, don't get so excited,' said the moneylender, who was nothing if he was not amenable, having built up his business on the maxim that the customer is always right.

'I tell you, turn the tip of your mustache down if you value your life!' raged Khan Azam Khan.

'If that is all the trouble, here you are,' said Ramanand, brushing one end of his mustache with his oily hand so that it dropped like a dead fly. 'Come, show me the trinkets. How much do you want for them?'

Now that Khan Azam Khan's pride was appeased, he was like soft wax in the merchant's sure hand. His need, and the need of his family for food, was great, and he humbly accepted the value which the banya put on his wife's nose-ring.

But as he was departing, after negotiating his business, he noticed that though one end of the banya's mustache had come down at his behest, the other end was still up.

'A strange trick you have played on me, you swine,' the Khan said.

'I have paid you the best value for your trinket, Khan, that any moneylender will pay in these parts,' the banya said, 'especially in these days when the Sarkars of the whole world are threatening to go off the gold standard.'

'It has nothing to do with the trinket,' said Azam Khan, 'but one end of your mustache is still up like my tiger mustache though you have brought down the other to your proper goat's style. Bring that other end down also, so that there is no apeing by your mustache of mine.'

'Now, Khan,' said the banya, 'I humbled myself because you are doing business with me. You can't expect me to become a mere worm just because you have pawned a trinket with me. If you were pledging some more expensive jewellery I might consider obliging you a little more. Anyhow, my humble milk-skimmer doesn't look a bit like your valiant tiger mustache.'

'Bring that tip down!' Khan Azam Khan roared, for the more he had looked at the banya's mustache the more the still upturned tip seemed to him like an effort at an imitation of his own.

'Now, be sensible, Khan,' the moneylender said, waving his hand with an imperturbable calm.

'I tell you, turn that tip down or I shall wring your neck,' said the Khan.

'All right, the next time you come to do business with me I shall bring that tip down,' answered the moneylender cunningly.

'That is fair,' said Chaudri Chottu Ram, the landlord of the village, who was sitting under the tree opposite.

'To be sure! To be sure!' some peasants chimed in sheepishly.

Khan Azam Khan managed to control his murderous impulses and walked away. But he could not quell his pride, the pride of the generations of his ancestors who had worn the tiger mustache as a mark of their high position. To see the symbol of his honour imitated by a banya—this was too much for him. He went home and fetched a necklace which had come down to his family through seven generations and, placing it before the banya, said:

'Now will you bring that tip of your mustache down?'

'By all means, Khan,' said the banya. 'But let us see about this necklace. How much do you want for it?'

'Any price will do, so long as you bring the tip of your mustache down,' answered Azam Khan.



After they had settled the business the moneylender said: 'Now Khan, I shall carry out your will.' And he ceremoniously brushed the upturned tip of his mustache down.

As Azam Khan was walking away, however, he noticed that the other tip of the banya's mustache had now gone up and stood dubiously like the upturned end of his own exalted tiger mustache. He turned on his feet and shouted:

'I shall kill you if you don't brush that mustache into the shape appropriate to your position as a lentil-eating banya!'

'Now, now, Khan, come to your senses. You know it is only the illusion of a tiger's mustache and nowhere like your brave and wonderful adornment,' said the greasy moneylender.

'I tell you I won't have you insulting the insignia of my order!' shouted Azam Khan. 'You bring that tip down!'

• 'I wouldn't do it, Khan, even if you pawned all the jewellery you possess to me,' said the moneylender.

'I would rather I lost all my remaining worldly possessions, my pots and pans, my clothes, even my house, than see the tip of your mustache turned up like that!' spluttered Azam Khan.

'Acha, if you care so little for all your goods and chattels you sell them to me and then I shall turn that tip of my mustache down,' said the moneylender. 'And, what is more, I shall keep it flat. Now, is that a bargain?'

'That seems fair enough,' said the landlord from under the trees where he was preparing for a siesta.

'But what proof have I that you will keep your word?' said Azam Khan. 'You oily lentil-eaters never keep your promises.'

'We shall draw up a deed, here and now,' said the moneylender. 'And we shall have it signed by the five elders of the village who are seated under that tree. What more do you want?'

'Now, there is no catch in that,' put in the landlord. 'I and four other elders will come to court as witnesses on your behalf if the banya doesn't keep his mustache to the goat style ever afterwards.'

'I shall excommunicate him from religion if he doesn't keep his

word,' added the priest,' who had arrived on the scene on hearing the hubbub.

'Acha,' agreed Azam Khan.

And he forthwith had a deed prepared by the petition writer of, the village, who sat smoking his bubble-bubble under the tree. And this document, transferring all his household goods and chattels, was signed in the presence of the five elders of the village and sealed. And the moneylender forthwith brought both tips of his mustache down and kept them glued in the goat style appropriate to his order.

Only, as soon as Khan Azam Khan's back was turned he muttered to the peasants seated near by: 'My father was a Sultan.'

And they laughed to see the Khan give a special twist to his mustache, as he walked away maintaining the valiant uprightness of the symbol of his ancient and noble family, though he had become a pauper.

Three Prose Poems

(*To Frances Connery-Chappell*)

THE LOST CHILD

It was the festival of spring. From the wintry shades of narrow lanes and alleys emerged a gaily clad humanity, thick as a swarm of bright-coloured rabbits issuing from a warren. They entered the flooded sea of sparkling silver sunshine outside the city gates and sped towards the fair. Some walked, some rode on horses, others sat, being carried in bamboo and bullock carts. One little boy ran between his parent's legs, brimming over with life and laughter. The joyous morning gave greetings and unashamed invitations to all to come away into the fields, full of flowers and songs.

'Come, child, come,' called his parents, as he lagged behind, arrested by the toys in the shops that lined the way.

He hurried towards his parents, his feet obedient to their call, his eyes still lingering on the receding toys. As he came to where they had stopped to wait for him he could not suppress the desire of his heart, even though he well knew the old, cold stare of refusal in their eyes.

'I want that toy,' he pleaded.

His father looked at him red-eyed, in his familiar tyrant's way. His mother, melted by the free spirit of the day, was tender, and giving him her finger to catch, said: 'Look, child, what is before you.'

The faint disgust of the child's unfulfilled desire had hardly been quelled in the heavy, pouting sob of a breath, 'm-o-th-er,' when the pleasure of what was before him filled his eager eyes. They had left the dusty road on which they had walked so far. It wended its weary way circuitously to the north. They had come upon a footpath in a field.

It was a flowering mustard field, pale like melting gold as it swept across miles and miles of even land—a river of yellow liquid light, ebbing and falling with each fresh eddy of wild wind, and straying in places into broad rich tributary streams, yet running in a constant sunny sweep towards the distant mirage of an ocean of silver light. Where it ended, on one side stood a cluster of low, mud-walled houses, thrown into relief by a dense crowd of yellow-robed men and women from which arose a high-pitched sequence of whistling, creaking, squeaking, roaring, humming noises, sweeping across the groves to the blue-throated sky like the weird, strange sound of Siva's mad laughter.

The child looked up to his father and mother, saturated with the shrill joy and wonder of this vast glory, and feeling that they, too, wore the evidence of this pure delight in their faces, he left the footpath and plunged headlong into the field, prancing like a young colt, his small feet timing with the fitful gusts of wind that came rich with the fragrance of more distant fields.

A group of dragon-flies were bustling about on their gaudy purple wings, intercepting the flight of a lone black bee or butterfly in search of sweetness from the flowers. The child followed them in the air with his gaze, till one of them would fold its wings and rest, and he would try to catch it. But it would go fluttering, flapping, up into the air, when he had almost caught it in his hands. One bold black bee, having evaded capture, sought to tempt him by whining round his ear and nearly settled on his lips, when his mother gave a cautionary call: 'Come, child, come, come on to the footpath.'

He ran towards his parents gaily and walked abreast of them for a while, being, however, soon left behind, attracted by the little insects and worms along the footpath that were teeming out from their hiding-places to enjoy the sunshine.

'Come, child, come,' his parents called from the shade of a grove where they had seated themselves on the edge of a well. He ran towards them.

An old banyan here outstretched its powerful arms over the blossoming jack and jaman and neem and champak and scrisha and cast its shadows across beds of golden cassia and crimson gulmohur as an old grandmother spreads her skirts over her young ones. But the blushing blossoms freely offered their adoration to the Sun in spite of their protecting chaperon, by half covering themselves, and the sweet perfume of their pollen mingled with the soft, cool breeze that came and went in little puffs, only to be wafted aloft by a stronger breeze.

A shower of young flowers fell upon the child as he entered the grove, and, forgetting his parents, he began to gather the raining petals in his hands. But lo! he heard the cooing of the doves and ran towards his parents, shouting: 'The dove! The dove!' The raining petals dropped from his forgotten hands. A curious look was in his parents' faces till a koel struck out a note of love and released their pent-up souls.

'Come, child, come!' they called to the child, who had now gone running in wild capers round the banyan tree, and gathering him

up they took the narrow, winding footpath which led to the fair through the mustard fields.

As they neared the village the child could see many other foot-paths full of throngs, converging to the whirlpool of the fair, and felt at once repelled and fascinated by the confusion of the world he was entering.

A sweetmeat seller hawked: 'Gulab-jaman, rasgula, burfi, jalebi,' at the corner of the entrance, and a crowd pressed round his counter at the foot of an architecture of many-coloured sweets, decorated with leaves of silver and gold. The child stared open-eyed and his mouth watered for the burfi that was his favourite sweet. 'I want that burfi,' he slowly murmured. But he half knew as he begged that his plea would not be heeded because his parents would say he was greedy. So without waiting for an answer he moved on.

A flower-seller hawked: 'A garland of gulmohur, a garland of gulmohur.' The child seemed irresistibly drawn by the implacable sweetness of the scents that came floating on the wings of the languid air. He went towards the basket where the flowers lay heaped and half murmured, 'I want that garland.' But he well knew his parents would refuse to buy him those flowers because they would say they were cheap. So without waiting for an answer he moved on.

A man stood holding a pole with yellow, red, green and purple balloons flying from it. The child was simply carried away by the rainbow glory of their silken colours and he was possessed by an overwhelming desire to possess them all. But he well knew his parents would never buy him the balloons because they would say he was too old to play with such toys. So he walked on farther.

A juggler stood playing a flute to a snake which coiled itself in a basket, its head raised in a graceful bend like the neck of a swan, while the music stole into its invisible ears like the gentle rippling of a miniature waterfall. The child went towards the juggler. But knowing his parents had forbidden him to hear such coarse music as the jugglers played, he proceeded farther.

There was a roundabout in full swing. Men, women and children, carried away in a whirling motion, shrieked and cried with dizzy

laughter. The child watched them intently going round and round, a pink blush of a smile on his face, his eyes rippling with the same movement, his lips parted in amazement, till he felt that he himself was being carried round. The ring seemed to go fiercely at first, then gradually it began to move less fast. Presently the child, rapt, finger in his mouth, beheld it stop. This time, before his overpowering love for the anticipated sensation of movement had been chilled by the thought of his parents' eternal denial, he made a bold request: 'I want to go on the roundabout, please, father, mother.'

There was no reply. He turned to look at his parents. They were not there, ahead of him. He turned to look on either side. They were not there. He looked behind. There was no sign of them.

A full, deep cry rose within his dry throat and with a sudden jerk of his body he ran from where he stood, crying in red fear, 'Mother, father!' Tears rolled down from his eyes, hot and fierce; his flushed face was convulsed with fear. Panic-stricken, he ran to one side first, then to the other, hither and thither in all directions, knowing not where to go. 'Mother, father!' he wailed! with a moist, shrill breath now, his throat being wet with swallowing his spittle. His yellow turban came untied and his clothes, wet with perspiration, became muddy where the dust had mixed with the sweat of his body. His light frame seemed heavy as a mass of lead.

Having run to and fro in a rage of running for a while he stood defeated, his cries suppressed into sobs. At little distances on the green grass he could see, through his filmy eyes, men and women talking. He tried to look intently among the patches of bright yellow clothes, but there was no sign of his father and mother among these people, who seemed to laugh and talk just for the sake of laughing and talking.

He ran hotly again, this time to a shrine to which people seemed to be crowding. Every little inch of space here was congested with men but he ran through people's legs, his little sob lingering: 'Mother, father!' Near the entrance to the temple, however, the crowd became very thick: men jostled each other, heavy men, with

THREE PROSE POEMS

flashing, murderous eyes and hefty shoulders. The poor child struggled to thrust a way between their feet but, knocked to and fro by their brutal movements, he might have been trampled underfoot had he not shrieked at the highest pitch of his voice: 'F-ather, mother!' A man in the surging crowd heard his cry and, stooping with very great difficulty, lifted him up in his arms.

'How did you get here, child? Whose baby are you?' the man asked as he steered clear of the mass. The child wept more bitterly than ever now and only cried: 'I want my mother, I want my father!'

The man tried to soothe him by taking him to the roundabout. 'Will you have a lift on the horse?' he gently asked as he approached the ring. The child's throat tore into a thousand shrill sobs and he only shouted: 'I want my mother, I want my father!'

- The man headed towards the place where the juggler still played on the flute to the dancing cobra. 'Listen to that nice music, child,' he pleaded. But the child shut his ears with his fingers and shouted his double-pitched strain: 'I want my mother, I want my father!' The man took him near the balloons, thinking the bright colours of the balls would distract the child's attention and quieten him. 'Would you like a rainbow-coloured balloon?' he persuasively asked. The child turned his eyes from the flying balloons and just sobbed: 'I want my mother, I want my father.'

The man, still importunate in his kindly desire to make the child happy, bore him to the gate where the flower-seller sat. 'Look! Can you smell those nice flowers, child? Would you like a garland to put round your neck?' The child turned his nose away from the basket and reiterated his sob: 'I want my mother, I want my father.'

Thinking to humour his disconsolate charge by a gift of sweets, the man took him to the counter of the sweet shop. 'What sweets would you like, child?' he asked. The child turned his face from the sweet shop and only sobbed: 'I want my mother, I want my father.'

THE ETERNAL WHY

HE leaned over the edge of the boat dangling his hands to reach the water, while his mother held him fast by the end of his tunic to prevent him from falling over. It was the central boat of the static fifty-one which supported the wooden bridge that had been built over the River Lunda, because no other could stand its ferocious moods. To-day, however, on a sultry afternoon in May, the stream was slow and peaceful. As the child bent over it he could see his silhouette and that of his mother reflected in the imperceptibly moving water.

This reflection of him sitting in the water was a curious phenomenon, something he had never seen before: it might almost have been his first awareness of life. He stared hard at it, from its immediate life-size through its gradual exaggeration to where his mother's form faded in the current and his own attained maturity by being elongated into an oval. Then, suddenly, he looked away as if self-conscious at having looked too much on himself, as if afraid that if he kept on looking he would not be able to resist the fascination of his form in the water.

'Why do we sit here, mother?' he asked, as he settled back into the boat for a moment.

'We are eating the air, child,' his mother replied vaguely, as she sat melting away into her shadow in the stream.

'Why do we eat the air, mother?' asked the child, opening his mouth wonderingly.

'We want to see a bit of life in the evening, my son,' she replied, with a delicately evasive smile.

He turned away, more amazed than satisfied by her answer.

His pure new consciousness was innocent of this aspect of reality—the river and the reflection of his form in its water.

He bent his head to look at it again. The image had now crystallized into a more shapely form and was not merely vague and silent in the distance.

'Mind you don't fall, looking into the river, child,' warned his father from where he sat smiling benevolently on the high stern end of the boat, just as the child's gaze had drifted from his own form to the reflection of the Sun splintered into countless stars upon the moving water.

Vaguely he heard his father's voice and equally vaguely he saw the Sun dancing in the rippling stream. Both the sound of his father's voice and the sight of the Sun's reflection disturbed his attention. He became busy reaching out for the little pieces of wood that came floating on the surface of the river. He would hold these bits of timber in a pile, but as they grew in number some of the pieces would drift away from the assemblage and he would extend his arm to catch them. Some of these he would arrest, others eluded his grasp. But he was not irritated if he failed to catch them and he went on collecting, re-collecting his treasure of chips from the floating blocks. Thus utterly absorbed in his game, he acquired a sort of power to concentrate on all the various moods of the current and cultivated almost the vivacity of the sunbeams that played and commingled with the waves.

Once, however, his hand strained to save at least one little piece of wood, when all those he had collected were let loose by the current, and he nearly jumped out of his mother's lap. She suddenly pulled him back and looked, dumb with apprehension, in her husband's face. Then she turned to the child remonstratingly: 'Child, sit still and play here in the middle of the boat. Don't stray to the sides.'

A little shaken by his mother's sudden pull and angry remonstrance, he struggled out of her grasp and sat in safety on a plank of wood that might have served as the rower's seat before the boat was turned to use to sustain the weight of the bridge. For a moment he was quite still. But his secret springs of energy burst forth again soon. The flush of discouragement fled from his face and a naughty light charged his eyes with bright sparks of gaiety. His lips were covered with a smile. He rose and scanned the bridge which chained the boats across the river. He could see men and women

walking across it, some heading straight across, others stopping to look at the river, or stepping into the boats to rest a while from the toil of the journey in the heat of the day; still others struggling to steer their herds of donkeys and goats, loaded with all kinds of goods and chattels, clear of the danger of falling into the river. These latter were big, burly men, ferocious and red, like the robbers his mother had told him about in the fairy story. They beat their beasts of burden brutally with huge sticks, to drive them fast, even though the poor animals were quaking under the weights on their backs. The child was frightened when a group of them passed, shaking the whole wooden structure with the powerful thumping of their heavy feet. It seemed as if the bridge which honest workmen had taken years to build would yield to their heavy, clumsy gait, and then every one would go swirling fast down the stream, shouting and struggling to keep afloat in utter confusion among the frothing waves. The child did not know why this should happen; nor what exact form it would take if it did happen; he was just afraid that it might happen, and in order to escape from this dreadful prospect of the future he looked away towards the hollows in the shore on both sides of the now rising stream.

He could hear the mournful wail of water butting into the rocks and he could see shadowy forms, shapeless bodies and featureless faces appear from a little stretch of even bank and vanish into the stream. He looked more intently and could recognize a few heads floating in the water, but like the dancing shadows that projected themselves from the kikar trees into the shimmering stream, like the cool evanescent breeze that arose from the dim, white mist across the water, like the foam among which they moved happily to and fro, they seemed to the child perplexingly unreal and indistinct.

‘What is that, mother?’ he asked, bewildered.

‘They are the holy men bathing in the river, child,’ his mother answered. ‘They are swimming.’

‘I want to swim, too,’ he said, and almost made towards the water.

'No, no,' said his mother, running after him. Bringing him near her, she began to console him: 'You are too small to swim yet. One day, when you are big and strong, you will swim, too, my child. Not till then, because the river is very cruel, and even very strong men are drowned in it.'

His gaze, retreating from the banks, began to probe each corner of the bare wooden structure of the boat. He flew and sat on a plank a yard ahead of the boat. Tempted to run farther he almost knocked his head against a high wooden wall that descended from the bridge. His mother raced after him and brought him back.

'Come, child, play here, near me,' she remonstrated. He was a bit cross with his mother for not letting him go and play as he liked. So he ran towards his father instead of coming back to her lap. This parent's benevolent smile consoled him, and for a little while he waited to find something which would revive his spirits. He soon discovered an interesting sensation, for as he stood near the high stern end of the boat he could hear its nose tear the water sharply. He mounted to his father's lap briskly, almost without aid, and looked towards the direction whence the swelling river came. He could see its vast sheet of rippling power converge into an even smaller chasm of silver light till it lost itself in the dim vaults of steep precipices.

Deep, deep in him, deep in his little soul, he knew there was something beyond the river, some dark force, some mysterious source from which it came.

'Where was the river born, father?' he asked therefore, almost as he might have asked for food, knowing there was such a thing to be had.

'It was born in the Himalayas, my child, from the cold, white snows on the roof of the world.'

'Where did the snow come from on the Himalayas, father?'

'It was formed by the rain which the clouds poured down, child.'

'Where did the clouds come from then?' he asked, like a true little philosopher, greedy to know the last cause of all things.

'They came from the sea, my child, from the boundless, infinite ocean.'

For a moment he was quiet and struggled to fit the mountains, the snow, the clouds, the sea into his dark pre-natal feeling for order; but failing to picture all these things either separately or together, he let his imagination try to assimilate knowledge by another course of reasoning.

'What is the name of the river, father?' he asked, urged by the unformulated theory that everything has its name original and primordial.

'It is called Lunda, my son.'

That answer seemed to satisfy him, and for a moment he sat back quietly.

The river was now in full swing. The subtle rhythm of its earlier hissing flow had given place to the crafty play of babbling waves. A wedge of slow ripples had spread the first flaws in a crystal sheet of indomitable power. Ebbing, falling, mounting, remounting, the terrible serpent poured itself down from the plain, a mighty sweep of opulent majesty, and borrowing the lustre of magnificence from the golden sun, enthroned itself upon the earth a mirthful, usurping Emperor.

The child trembled with fear as he contemplated the roaring hum of the demoniac rushing stream. He looked into his mother's eyes for comfort. There was a tender look of reassurance in her dusky face. So he sat safely in conviction of her supporting love, and in a while even mustered courage to stare into the stream again.

A whirlpool engaged his attention: first a disembodied look, then his searching watchfulness. The revolving water did not seem to move. Why did it not move? He looked and looked, waiting for the pent-up snag to release itself. It would not flow. He stared hard at it. There was a difference, but the dimple in the pool persisted, like the dimple on his mother's face. This mark on the dark, leonine, imperious stream persisted, the mystery of the river's soul, so like the mystery of woman's soul, innocent, simple, yet in the

end subtle, mysterious, unknowable, perhaps even capricious. He was beaten by the mystery.

‘Why does not the water there flow, father?’

• ‘Because there is a deep, deep pit in it and the water gets lost in it.’

‘But why does the other water flow?’

‘Because it avoids the deep pits and goes over even land.’

He watched the endless, writhing flow of the stream again. But there was still a part of his intuition to be exorcised from the depths below the depths within him. He contemplated his father’s answer to his last question and then fired off another.

‘Where does the water go, father?’

‘It goes to the sea, my son.’

• ‘But it came from the sea, did it not?’

• ‘Yes, my son, it came from the sea; from the boundless, infinite ocean it came, into that vast ocean will it go.’

‘Where is the sea, father?’

‘It is on the other side of the world, child.’

A smile of endless light lingered in the eyes of the day. It came upon the earth and played about the child’s face like a dim aureole as he sat now in his mother’s lap in the joy of his newly gained knowledge. Through the burdensome multiplicity of unending experience, he could see that the mystery of the river’s origin, the secret of its journey and the riddle of its destination had some significance for him.

But what it was he did not know. As the golden sunlight faded and the silver moonlight fell on the limitless expanse of water power he asked one last question: ‘If the sea is on the other side of the world, father, why is the river on this side?’

‘They are really in the same world, child. Only they appear to be separated. The river comes from the sea and goes sweeping incessantly onward to it. But I do not know, child. I cannot go on answering your eternal whys.’

THE CONQUEROR

THE blazing Sun trembled in a smile on the lips of the Western horizon, a last smile of melting gold. The sapphire heavens accepted it with the misty haze of fatherly sobriety. The dusty body of mother earth seemed like a flowing river of yellow liquid light seen in an ecstatic trance. The conic peaks of two dizzy heights rose on the surface of the plain like two purple nipples full of an azure, scarlet blood.

A group of bright-eyed children stood in the bare shadow of a pipal tree shooting swift arrows of impetuous speech, while their bamboo bows were still slung on their shoulders and their arrows still nestled in their toy quivers. They were of varying ages, but none older than ten and none younger than six. And though there were a great many of them, they all seemed of one mind, if not with regard to all things, yet with regard to two: one, that the higher peak before them was the fort about which they were to range themselves in opposing parties to fight and conquer; two, that the new arrival, the little child of five who was coming with them, was not to be allowed to take part in the battle, because he was too small, had no bow and arrow, might get hurt and thus cause them to be reprimanded by their parents.

The piercing rays of the departing Sun touched the child's tender heart and set his warm blood flowing with love for the companions he was approaching. There was in him a secret, innocent impulse for friendliness such as is primeval and spontaneous in all things nearest to nature and which had now taken in him the form of a vague eagerness at the prospect of company. He was full of enthusiasm for his friends and their sport. But as yet he did not know that they would refuse to let him join them, that the thrill of his anticipated pleasure would fade away into the pale weakness of a sighing despair.

He was still some distance away from his fellows, and although he was hurrying towards them his deep, unquestioning faith in

all-will-be-well, confirmed by the fixity of the group under the pipal tree, reassured him in the contemplation of the twilight that spread before him.

- Red streaks of burning light infused patches of grey cloud as the extinguished pieces of coal-fire lie in the small thick masses of ashes. The hills looked not unlike the dark edges of an oven gently shading from their lower soft pale to blonde wheat, from rich dark olive to red dark purple and finally to an intense black. The vast plain was now like a silken veil of amethyst with every shrub and tuft of grass a deeper green and every grey mound of stone a richer black.

Someone stirred in the group and led the way towards the foot of the hill fixed upon as the fort to be besieged and conquered.

The child shouted to the beat of a grim premonition: 'Wait, I am coming!' and began to run across the grass and stones. The group of elder boys had all turned their backs upon him. He shouted again, still running. They seemed to be walking away unheeding. He shouted yet again, this time with such desperate force that his throat sounded dry and hoarse. His little body became hot and perspiring as his natural haste gave place to a clumsy rush, till he seemed like a fuming ball of smoke let loose into a furious spurt by some sudden blast of confused wind. He pulled himself up for a moment when he saw that his friends had run away from him.

He had now sensed their trickery and stood looking round for a moment. Then, thoughtless, he ran again as if panic-stricken. In the confusion of this rush his bright-eyed, red-cheeked face seemed to dull into a vaporous greasy surface. Unconscious of himself as of his goal, he ran desperately, furiously, with all the might of his little body. A stone, big, round, immobile, lay under the pipal tree, a challenge to be dodged and respected. But the child had no thought for Siva and he had lost the dodging sense. He stumbled across it, hitting his shin, and fell to one side. A little cry rose from his heart, rich with pain, bringing dewy tears to his eyes.

As he lay, however, for a moment looking at the turquoise sky above him and the hazel earth about, the bleak and dreary sense of

failure seemed to desert him. A sudden intuition made him obstinate, and in a while tears stopped half way down his cheeks and his sob died down into a sigh and his cry stopped in his belly and would not rise. He cleared his throat of the choking breath that seemed to linger from the last hoarse shout and stood up.

The boys were at the foot of the hill now, a pack who had lost their common conviction through the dislocation caused by hap-hazard running. They lingered about with their bows and arrows in separate bands as if they had forgotten how to adjust the one to the other. Broken they looked, a mob with no generals, for the boy who had led the way was fat and clumsy and had lagged behind the others, and the boy who had started the intrigue was trembling.

It seemed they were all afraid that the child would tell on them.

The child had different thoughts. Bravely, with a grim determination, he surveyed the conic peak that he knew they had appointed as the fort to be conquered. It stood tall and elegant as a cypress tree. Its shapely form reminded the child of something he had seen before. He seemed impelled by it to go forward, attracted by something magnetic about it, some mysterious mastery it had over his heart.

He ran towards the foot of the hill, his heart beating a steady tattoo to his feet. His gait was full of power now and the small mounds seemed to aid his progress by their slow rises and falls: at each incline his feet moved with the force derived from the last decline.

'Go back, go back!' the boys shouted as he approached the foot of the hill. He still kept running and did not answer.

'Go back, go back!' they called with weak, disapproving, cautious voices.

But in the darkness of the swiftly approaching night he ran up the hill, his bright face showing to his fellows the torch-light of the conqueror.

The Cobbler and the Machine

(To Arthur and Ara Calder Marshall)

APART from the innocence of old age and youth, Saudagar, the cobbler of my village, and I shared in common a passion for the machine.

Saudagar, of course, was interested in only one machine, the small sewing-machine which the village tailor wielded very ostentatiously on the footboard of his cavernous shop before the gaping rustics, who had often travelled fifty miles from their homes in the hills to see it—a grimy, black hand-machine in a casket, decorated with a tracery of leaves in yellow paint, that nibbled at the yards of cloth like a slimy rat, at terrific speed. But I liked all kinds of machines which I saw in the town where I went to school every morning: the great big railway-engine, whose phuff-phuff I had learned to imitate when we played at trains at the recess hour; the phonograph from which I hoped to hear my own voice one day; the motor-car in which my father was given a lift by Lalla Sain Das when there was an election; the push-bike on which our second master came to school from his bungalow; the intricate mass of wheels and pistons which lay hiccuping in the powerhouse at the junction of the two canals; and the roaring monsters of iron and steel that converted the cotton and wool of our village into cloth at the Dhariwal mills. And even of sewing-machines I had seen at least two varieties other than the one that Saudagar knew, and yet a third—a pedal-machine, adjusted to a chair with a leather belt across it, to which I used to see Baha-ud-din, the tailor in the Main Bazaar in the town, glued all day, and a similar upright contraption on which one of the employees in the Bhalla shoe shop sat sewing boots.

‘Uncle Saudagar,’ I said to the cobbler one day as I sat idly at the door of his dark straw hut while he stared across the street at

Bhagirath, the tailor, revolving the handle of his sewing-machine with amazing alacrity. 'Do you know you waste so much of your time sewing pieces of leather to the soles of people's shoes and then they complain that you don't sew them well and that the water gets into them? Why, you could have a machine like Bhagirath's, even superior, with a seat attached to it like the chairs the Sahibs sit on. I have seen a man in the Bhalla shoe shop sewing boots on one.'

'Is there a machine like that, son?' said Saudagar incredulously, and yet vaguely convinced, as he had been for months since the tailor bought his casket machine, that there must be a contrivance for sewing leather as there was one for sewing cloth.

'Yes, uncle,' I said enthusiastically, for to me all machines were still toys and playthings, rather than 'chariots which men could ride.' 'There are wonderful machines in the town if only you will go and see, but you never stir out of this hovel. Didn't you go to see the great exhibition at Lahore? My father tells me there was a great big boot there all sewn by machine in which people could play hide-and-seek.' I had seen the wonders of science in the school laboratory and the marvels in the streets of the town and wished rather too eagerly that they could come to my village, so convinced was I of the superiority of modernity over the old ways of the countryside.

'Well, son,' said the old man kindly, 'I have heard that there is a machine which can do the work of my hand, but I have never seen it. Ever since I saw the ready-made saddles, reins and collars in the stables of Thakur Mahan Chand, I knew they were made by a defter hand than that of man. And when the son of the landlord sent me the black leather boots which he bought in town to mend I knew that they couldn't have been sewn by any human being. And truly, I have been looking at Bhagirath's sewing-machine and wondering if there is a similar contraption for sewing shoes. But I am old and I have not been to town these ten years. So I have not seen what this machine looks like. One day I must make a trip to see it. But, of course, I am too poor ever to be able to buy it. And perhaps God would curse my fingers and those of my

pupils, and make them incapable of sewing at all, if I began to use this machine.'

'But, Uncle Saudagar,' I said, 'I tell you you will like this machine if you see it. And you will look like a Sahib sitting on the chair which is adjusted to it. You will only need a basket-hat to complete your life and you will begin to eat and drink on a raised platform automatically. I wish my mother would let me convert that broken pitcher we have into a chair and I could use the manger of the cows for a table always.'

'I am an outcast, son,' Saudagar said. 'How can I presume to eat like the Sahibs or be like them. And won't people laugh at me if they see me seated in a chair, sewing shoes?'

'But these people are fools, Uncle,' I said. 'They regard the Sahibs as outcasts, too, even though the Sahibs are clean. And these rustics have no idea of modern times. They are old fogies with jungly habits. They are oxen. They have no idea of the new life.'

'Yes, son, perhaps you are right,' said the old cobbler. 'God has created iron in the mountains. I suppose He meant us to make machines with it.'

'I have got a beautiful bolt I found in the playground, Uncle,' I said. 'I will show it to you, if you like.'

'I would like to see it, son,' said Saudagar indulgently. 'Now run along and go home. Your father might come this way and abuse you for wasting your time sitting in an outcast's shop. Run along and play with your fellows.'

'I will also bring you a picture of the sewing-machine, if you like, Uncle,' I said, making an overture of friendship so as to win more easily the privilege of fidgeting round the cobbler's shop, for ordinarily he discouraged children from flocking round the door of his hovel and robbing his dim eyes of the little natural light that trickled through the aperture of the door.

'Allright,' he said. 'All right, son. You must show me a picture if you can, though I don't know what use it is to show a man the likeness of a bunch of grapes when he will never be able to eat the fruit.'

But the spark that had failed to kindle a devouring flame in the

heart of old Saudagar lit my flesh with the warmth of a new delight, for the echo of the old cobbler of my village handling a new machine reverberated in my brain like the voice of a wish that had become father to the thought. I ran towards home as if I were possessed by more than a love of the new toy that would be Saudagar's machine. I had a feeling that there might come to be in my village the atmosphere of a splendid, gorgeous wonder-house, in which great big iron frames, with a thousand screws and knobs assembled through the ingenuity of a man like my science master, created the power to achieve miracles.

I persuaded my class-fellows when we were coming home from school the next day to climb a high wall near the Railway Station and pull off a poster which showed an Englishwoman, with a bun on the top of her head, wielding a Singer sewing-machine embossed on a steel plate in the shape of the letter S. And I brought it to Saudagar.

'This, Uncle,' I said, 'is the kind of machine which I told you you should have. Only this is for sewing cloth. But the one for sewing leather which the man in the Bhalla shoe shop plies is like it in appearance, except that it has a thicker needle.'

The old cobbler looked at the picture in wide-eyed wonder. I could see from the loving way in which he passed his hand over the surface of the steel that his imagination had caught fire from the picture of the sewing-machine, bigger than Bhagirath's, which seemed to make him firmly believe in the existence of a similar machine for sewing leather though he hadn't seen it.

And so charmed was he by the novelty of the instrument of which I had shown him the picture, that he asked us to bring the steel plate which we had stolen into his shop and leave it there for a decoration. And he gave us a pice each as compensation for our trouble.

It seemed to me that he had not kept the advertisement for the Singer sewing-machine merely for decorative purposes, but because he wanted to see the likeness of the object which he had set his heart on buying one day. And my feeling was confirmed by

the fact that whenever I went to his hovel now he would always say something about the shape of the needle in the picture not being quite clear, and of his inability to understand how one could get into the habit of pressing the pedal with the feet while one was sewing something on top.

'And the stool seems too small,' he said. 'It may be all right for the "lendis" to sit on, but how will such a crude old bottom as mine balance on it?'

'Don't you care,' I said, with an emphasis that gained weight from the earnestness and zeal I felt at the prospect of seeing the cobbler of my village achieve the dexterity of the man in the Bhalla shoe shop. 'A little practice and you will learn to wield it better than anyone else, and as for your old posterior, why, I have seen the heavy-bottomed Mem Sahib, who is the wife of the City Engineer, balanced on a stool like that in the verandah of her bungalow, as if she were seated on a comfortable horse.'

A look of wonder lit his dim eyes and, glancing at me with the tenderness of humility, he traced the curves of the steel plate on the picture of the machine printed in black-and-white against the green. And then he would close his eyes and, smiling, shake his head as if he were surcharged with the ecstasy of a knowledge in the hollows of his brain where phantasmagoric visions of himself at work on the new machine swirled in a mad delirium, the edges of enchanting top-boots, splendid, well-polished shoes, and strong-soled country shoes creating and destroying each other in an irrelevant disorder.

'But anyhow, the trouble is, son, where am I to get the money to buy the machine?' the old man would then say with a sigh, and continue: 'I don't know how I shall get it, and where it is to be got even if I had the money, which I shall never have.'

The grim sagacity of his practical argument defeated my intelligence, for I had no idea how many rupees the machine cost and where Saudagar was to get the money, but, of course, the address of the Singer Sewing Machine Company, England, was printed at the bottom of the picture, and I speculated that if that company

manufactured sewing-machines for cloth, surely they made those for sewing leather, and I said: 'It is made in Vilayat, and can be had from there, or perhaps through a commission agent in Lahore or Bombay, if not in our district.'

'Vilayat is very far away,' Saudagar said, 'and I shall never cross the seven seas even when I go to Heaven, because I have not done enough good deeds to earn the privilege of being able to travel in my next life. As for Lahore and Bombay, if anyone is going there from our parts we will make inquiries.'

But for days and weeks and months no one from our parts was going to Lahore, Delhi, or Bombay, and I hugged the desperate enthusiasm for Saudagar's sewing-machine in my heart till the cool waters of a placid existence had washed off the bright edges of my dreams. I went to see the cobbler as usual in the afternoons, but the topic of the machine was seldom mentioned, and instead the old man bent over the shoes he was mending, brushed his beard, and, with a mischievous light in his eyes, told me a story about some ogre or wild animal, or the witchery of an old maiden who died without ever being married.

One day, however, when I was waiting at the usual hour for my friends to emerge from their homes to play in a maidan near Saudagar's house, he called me and, with a weird chuckle that rose above the curve of his usual silence into a jerky shriek like the convulsive laugh of a madman, he said: 'Come here, son, and guess what has happened.'

'What is it, then?' I asked, at first completely taken aback but then warming to the happy glare in his eyes with a sensation that the cause of Saudagar's sudden happiness was somehow connected with our project about the machine.

'You know, son, that Lalla Sain Das, the notary and cotton dealer, has gone to Vilayat on business. Well, he asked me to make him some gold-worked shoes to give as presents to his clients beyond the seas. When he came to collect them he asked me politely whether he could do something for me while he was away. And I asked him to fetch a machine for sewing leather. He was

very kind and said he would bring the machine most willingly. And what is more, that since he knew I was a poor man who couldn't pay him for the thing at once, he would buy the machine at his own expense and let me use it and pay for it by and by exactly as if it were a loan with a small interest attached to it. Now I have had this letter from the rail office and the Munshi read it and he says that it is the voucher for the sewing-machine which Lalla Sain Das has sent from Vilayat and which is lying in the railway godown. So, please God, I shall have the machine after all. I am going to distribute sugar-plums among the brotherhood to celebrate the auspicious occasion when the machine comes, and I will make you a pair of Angrezi boots, since it was really you who told me about it.

I clapped my hands with joy, breathed some breaths quickly, and stimulated my being with shouts of 'Marvellous! Marvellous!' And, either because I easily whipped myself into a kind of elemental buoyancy, or because it was the natural colour of my temperament, I danced in my mind to the cadences of a rhythm I could feel in the working of the machines, in its contours, in its dainty, intricate contrivances, its highly ingenious purpose, in the miracle it was to me, an architecture embodying mysteries which not only represented the exact formulas of science and mathematics, but was the magnificent toy, the plaything. And, of course, Saudagar's offer of a pair of Angrezi boots, such as I had been persuading my father to buy me for years, made me hysterically happy, for I felt that I could rise in the estimation of all my fellows by possessing footwear which was worn only by the Sahibs and the rich folk.

'When will you actually get the machine, Uncle?' I asked eagerly.

'I shall go and get it to-morrow, son,' he said. 'It is after eleven years that I am going to town.'

'If you are in town, then, go and get the advice of the cobbler in the Bhalla shoe shop as to how to work it.'

'That is a good idea,' Saudagar said. 'Yes, I will do that. And

since you have been so good to me, child, I shall take your measurements now and start sewing your shoes first on the machine.'

I would have stayed and talked about the possibilities of the new wonder to Saudagar if my friends had not been calling incessantly, but that afternoon I was too preoccupied by my ardour to put my heart into playing Kabadi, and I couldn't sleep in the night for the sheer excitement of sharing the glory of having inspired the old cobbler. In the morning I ran along to school bound up in the curves of a rich stillness, the radiant exultation of a child whose fantastic dreams have, for the first time, achieved the guise of visible truths. And all day I was full of mischief—the tingling shadow of an ingrown largeness in my being played havoc with every mundane fact, the vastness of the creator laughed at people, and the depths of a realized truth mocked at impossibilities.

Off I went to Saudagar's shop immediately after I returned from school and, true as the very colour of my dream, even truer because harder, the sewing-machine was before me, with the old cobbler seated on the stool adjusted to it, sewing a piece of leather, with beads of perspiration on his forehead, as his two pupils and a number of other people of low and high castes crowded into the hovel to see the wizardry.

'Come, son,' Saudagar said, lifting his eyes and breathing a mouthful of stale breath. 'This is the upper part of the boots I am going to sew for you, since you must have the first-fruits of my acquisition.'

I smiled awkwardly and then felt a sudden urge to touch the wonderful new thing which was exactly like the sewing-machine of which I had brought Saudagar the picture, except that it had no casket to enclose the upper part, but an anvil into which the needle darted like a shaft, probing the leather in between with the cotton in its eye. But I curbed my childish desire as, just then, Saudagar brushed aside the crowd which was also clamouring to touch it, and I only asked: 'When will my shoes be ready, Uncle?'

'You shall have them by and by,' Saudagar said. 'I will sew them at any odd times I get, because all the rest of my time must be

devoted to turning out enough work to pay off the debt I owe on the machine to Lalla Sain Das, who is coming back to-morrow.'

My visits to the cobbler's shop became more frequent since I could always excuse myself to my parents by saying that I was going to the outcast's quarter to see how the boots that Saudagar had promised to make me were getting on. And as my old Indian shoes made of crude hide were wearing out and my parents would have had to buy me a new pair if Saudagar had not offered me the gift, I was allowed to go and waste as much time as I liked.

Saudagar had added a pattern of stitches to the shoes he intended for me during the first few days, but then he had hung them up as a sample on the door of his hut, and was mainly busy turning out Indian shoes by the dozen to defray the interest that accrued at the rate of fifteen per cent. on the sum of one thousand rupees, which Sain Das had declared to be the cost of the machine plus freightage and taxes. Every time I went the old man would pick up the sample and contemplate it with an air of absorption and say: 'Well, son, I believe I shall begin to sew the lining to them next week, and then I must send Majitha to get some leather for the soles and heels. Or would you like rubber soles instead?'

'No, I want leather soles and rubber heels, Uncle,' I said, swinging from the first disappointment of seeing the shoes no further advanced to a sudden excitement.

'You can't have both, son,' Saudagar would say kindly.

'I want to set the fashion,' I replied.

'But, son, let me make you an ordinary pair first,' said the old man, 'and then later—'

'When will they be ready?' I would ask impatiently.

'To-morrow, by the grace of God, to-morrow I shall do something to them...'

But to-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow came and went, and as my old Indian shoes were completely worn out and discarded, I trudged barefoot to and from school, and cursed both my parents for not buying me a new pair of Angrezi shoes and Saudagar for not completing the pair he had promised me.

I couldn't realize that my parents were poor and could not afford to buy me a new pair of English boots, and I was too obstinate to accept a cheap pair of Indian shoes. But Saudagar's work was pledged to Lalla Sain Das for the money the cobbler had borrowed to buy the machine, and I was disgusted.

'Let me buy you a good pair of shoes like your old ones,' my mother said.

'No,' I replied stubbornly. 'I want English shoes and you needn't bother because Saudagar is making them for me.'

"Never trust a washerman's promise, nor a goldsmith's nor a cobbler's," she quoted the proverb.

But mine was the faith that would have moved mountains but for the fact that an act of God intervened. Saudagar, the old cobbler, fell ill and was unable to work for days, and when he got up from his illness he had to clear arrears of debt and work so hard on his ordinary job that he had no time left even to think of the shoes he had so lovingly cut and on which he had sewn the first stitches. And considering that he had not been able to pay up even the arrears of interest on the cost of the machine, there was little prospect of his ever completing the job for me.

I looked at the old man bending over the machine and working patiently as the sweat poured from his face on to his neck and then on to the earth, and I felt constrained not to trouble him with my demands. And the mixture of resentment and pity I felt for the old man became transformed into a feeling of hate for the machine, for, as it stood hard, hard and unbending, it seemed to have become a barrier between Saudagar and me and the thing which had emphasized his self-interest so that he never seemed to put a stitch on anyone's shoes without insisting on being paid for it. And as he sat tied to the chariot wheels of doom, he also began to be more and more reticent, as if he were turning in upon himself to drink his own blood in the silent places of his heart, and the illumination of his natural manner disappeared behind a pale, shadowy face that was always dirty and grimy with a layer of scum on the sweat-covered beard. And still the sample shoes of

A CONFESSION

English design meant for me stood unfinished, while he and his assistants worked furiously to produce enough to pay off the debt on the machine.

I shook the roots of hope from their foundation in my heart and rarely visited Saudagar's shop, thinking he would call me one day when the remorse of his unfulfilled promise had prompted him to finish making my boots.

But that day never came, for, worn out by the fatigue of producing many more shoes than he had ever sewn to pay off his debt, drained of his life-blood by the sweat that was always pouring off his body, he fell stone dead one evening as he recited the devotional verses:

‘The days of your life are ending
And you have not made your accounts with God.’

In the amorphous desert of my familiar thoughts I felt the pain of a silent guilt, as I knew that I had to some extent been the cause of his death. If only I had known then that it was not enough for Saudagar and his pupils to love the machine and work it, but to own it, I could have defied the verdict of the village which said that Saudagar was killed by the devil disguised in the image of the sewing-machine.



A Confession

I DON'T know why he had to say it to me. But, after listening to the address of Srijut Bishambar Dayal Bhargava on the achievements of the national renaissance during the last few years, I had to go home with Latif and, on seeing him ostentatiously lift the cloth from the sumptuous supper which his wife had left on the table, I had casually let fall the remark: ‘I wonder how many coolies have been

vouchsafed the advantages of a fifth meal like this, through the Struggle, or for the matter of that, of a meal at all.'

'You are a cynic,' Latif said, and in a characteristic lawyer's manner sought to defend the lovely food against my aspersions: 'You would not wish to deprive those of us who have the good things of the world of their enjoyment of them when you yourself are really trying to afford the poor the advantages they don't possess. You will produce utter chaos in this world if you do that, and law, authority and religion will all go by the board. As you know, there have always been inequalities in this world; the sheep always want to be led, and they want God as much as bread. So it was in the past, so it is in the present, so it will be in the future.'

'I am probably a prig,' I said. 'I have an awful conscience because I feel that the humiliation of the poor is also my humiliation.'

For a while there was a tension in the atmosphere and we went on eating quietly. It was a delicious meal—rissoles, with pickles of various kinds and dry chapattis to eat, and some French white wine to drink. I was enjoying it immensely and yet trying to restrain myself from betraying this either by word or sign, as I didn't want to show that this was a special occasion, and that never since my return from Europe had I tasted French wine.

'I want to say something to you,' Latif began suddenly, dropping his knife and fork. And as I looked up at him, his face was flushed with a certain agitation and his eyes bent down.

'Go ahead,' I said. 'What is it?' And, perhaps because I pronounced those words rather indifferently, Latif hesitated for a moment, looked at me furtively, as if to make sure that I wouldn't laugh at him, and then, leaving his food, burst out quickly, earnestly, in English, as if he wanted to get it over in a mouthful:

'I want to confess something to you. It is sincere. I didn't realize it till now. Honestly! You know I have been a Municipal Commissioner for some years, and this and my practice leave me very little time even to say prayers. . . . I am lucky to have met such an esteemed person as you. In fact, I wrote to my brother in Delhi

and told him that you were gracing our house with a visit. So you will realize that it wasn't my fault altogether. . . .'

He paused for a moment. I didn't know what all this rigmarole was about. I was slightly embarrassed by his kindly references to me. But what was he getting at? I made a vague guess or two as to what he was going to say, but before my speculations had taken any shape he resumed his narrative, with the same terrific hurry to get it over with which he had begun.

'I was going up to argue the Habib-ud-Din murder case, the appeal for which was to come up before Mr. Justice Thakur Das at eleven-thirty this morning, and having missed the frontier mail at eight because that bahin chod sala coachman of mine didn't wake me, I reached Lahore by an ordinary train at eleven. . . .'

Something seemed to get stuck in his throat at this and he coughed noisily and, leaning over his chair, spat into the verandah decorated by palms and evergreens. Then, twisting the muscles of his face with anger at the interruption, he began hoarsely:

'I must see the Hakim about this bahin-chod cough . . . but I am always so busy, honestly! . . . You know what a big station Lahore is. The train came into the platform number twelve after its usual slow crawl; it becomes slow like an ant from Mughalpura cantonment to Lahore junction. And there was such a crowd of those uncouth, cumbersome peasants and third-class passengers, struggling to rush up the bridges, knocking your sides about with their staves and their bundles and their bedsteads, you know, I shouted for a coolie to come and bear my suitcase and take me by some less crowded way to the exit near the first-, second- and inter-class booking-office in the hall where I could get a tonga.'

'The man, a dingy little poorbia with a shrivelled face, looked cunning. I didn't like him from the beginning, as he kept very dumb, but he must have been clever; for though he pretended to be a fool, he made a mysterious sign for me to follow. . . .'

Saying this, Latif shook his head and lifted the lid of his left eye, as if to emphasize his estimate of the man's suspicious character, smiled while he paused to create a deliberate suspense, and went on:

'Obviously he had made a practice of smuggling gentlemen who travel "without" out of the station, because he took me through the kitchen of the first-class restaurant, through an assistant stationmaster's office on platform number twelve, across the rails, by the steaming engine of the Karachi express, through a soldiers' canteen, and then by a short cut over an empty bridge on to platform number one. He must have been a rogue, as he looked surprised when I took out my ticket to hand over to the ticket-collector at the gate. I am convinced that this coolie imagined me to be "without" as he was almost walking through the doors of the goods godown of his own accord when I called him and directed him towards the proper exit. I am sure he had made a habit of smuggling people for a little bakhshish. Honestly! There could be no doubt about that, but . . .'

At this Latif saw that my glance was averted from him, and he paused, perhaps because he felt apprehensive that he was not carrying me along with him.

'And then?' I said, affecting an indifferent manner.

'I hailed a tonga when I got outside, but the tonga wallah was insolent and, seeing that I wanted only a single seat, beckoned a family of five who were waiting for a conveyance. On seeing this, my coolie ran and fetched another tonga for me without my asking him, a thing which made me very angry because I knew that he would want an extra tip for doing that. These railway coolies are pukka badmashes. He put my brief-case into the tonga and, without salaaming or anything, hurriedly stretched his hand out and said: "Huzoor."

"Acha, be patient, I am not running away," I told him, as the man's abruptness irritated me. I felt that if it weren't for his knowledge of the intricate ways of the station I could easily have borne my brief-case, and I felt that he hadn't earned his wages. . . . As you will admit, a small case isn't heavy. . . . And I couldn't help hating the man for his insolence as he stood. Baba, whatever you may say, these people have raised their heads to the skies and, because they have no breeding, they are absolutely insulting. This man had a sullen

expression on his face, and preened himself, though he was an ugly poorbia, because he had twisted his white mustachios, discoloured an orange-red by tobacco on the ends, upright, and had had a perfectly clean shave even though his jaws were ugly and hollow....

I was going to interrupt Latif by saying that the fact that the man had had a shave and had put out his hand without undue ceremony didn't necessarily mean that he was insolent, but I had hardly opened my mouth when he lifted his hand and raced on eagerly.

"I did not mind, really. I put my hand into the pocket of my patloon for the small change I had. I could feel an eight-anna bit and four anna bits. I took the two nickel anna pieces out of my pocket and gave them to him with a smile, admonishing him jokingly: "You must give up your illegal traffic in smuggling people without tickets across the station." But the damn sala said curtly: "Huzoor, the rate of bearing a case is four annas."

"You are barking an untruth," I said, as his insolence made me very angry indeed. You will admit that the provocation he was offering me was great, particularly as I was in a hurry and he knew he was delaying me. I admit that I was wrong in losing my temper and talking to him impatiently, but I assure you I tried to be as reasonable as I could, and I said to him in a gentlemanly way: "Bai, accept what you have been given and don't make a row." But he caught hold of me, not in supplication, mind you, but to prevent me from going. So you see that I was justified in thinking he was a rogue. "Accept what you have been given," I said, "or I shall hand you over to the police for carrying on that illegal traffic in conveying people without tickets across the station."

"Huzoor, Huzoor, give me my dues," he insisted, bending and joining his hands. Perhaps I was harsh on him, but I didn't believe him when he said: "I don't want anything more than my wages," particularly as he began to insult me openly, saying: "Most people give me a tip, but you look like a kanjus Sahib, so I shall be content if you give me my wages."

'I was enraged at his calling me a miser Sahib, as anyone might

be on being spoken to like that by a mere labourer. But I was getting late for the Court, and, controlling my anger, I began to board the tonga, feeling that if I had had more time perhaps I would have bargained with him and paid him a little more, as, sincerely, I didn't want to deprive him of his just dues. But he held me back by the lapels of my coat and whined: "Huzoor, Huzoor!"

"I was so annoyed by the touch of the sala's dirty hands preventing me from getting on the carriage. . . . You see he was being impudent and impertinent, and I might have fallen, the way he pulled me, as I had one foot on the foot-rest. Then I lost my temper. I descended, and, turning round, gave him a kick so that he fell back weeping. I am sorry I did that, but, sincerely, what else could anyone have done?"

Latif paused as if he had finished his narrative, and he looked at me at once guiltily and as if he wanted to enlist my sympathy for his righteousness and honesty. My face was set without a flicker and yet he must have seen that I considered him blameworthy. He lowered his voice and sought to unburden himself more humbly.

"Some people gathered round to see what was up, and I saw a policeman approaching. It seemed to me a disgrace that I, a respectable citizen, a Municipal Commissioner and a Vakil, should get involved in an unpleasant scene like that, particularly as I don't like being in a crowd: I get an awful feeling of claustrophobia when I am surrounded—it makes me feel very nervy. So, for a moment, I thought of putting my hand in my pocket and flinging another two annas at him, to have done with it all. But frankly, I was keeping two annas to pay the tonga wallah, and I wanted to economize, because when you live to a certain standard, you see, you have all kinds of expenses to meet, particularly if you have a large family to keep. And I didn't want to change a rupee. And then something very awkward happened: a voice called: "What is the matter, Latif?" and I recognized the face of Gulshan Rai, who is an advocate of the High Court, Lahore, and a friend of mine since college days.

"Huzoor, I bore the Sahib's case from the platform number twelve to hall, and the rate is four annas, while the Sahib has only

given me two annas," that coolie blurted out before I could say a word.

'I felt utterly humiliated in the eyes of Gulshan Rai and my anger knew no bounds, but I couldn't do anything. Although I would have felt very sorry before you, as it is below my dignity to have been involved in that row, I could have kicked that badmash. I only said to Gulshan: "This man is a fraud." And, sincerely, whatever may have happened, I still believe that he was what I say he was. I told every one: "I think this man helps people without tickets to get out of the station, and I won't pay him a pice more."

"Oh, come," said Gulshan, "pay him two annas more."

'At that I thought of saving my face before Gulshan, as I knew the story would spread in the Bar room and my prestige might be damaged, and I pretended to look in my pockets for change and got out a rupee. I don't often do that. Sincerely. Please believe me. In fact, people will tell you that I am very generous, as I certainly have given more garden parties in this municipality than any other respectable citizen. I don't know what you will think of me. But I did that. And perhaps I am to blame. I don't know what possessed me but I did that.'

His face reddened and he looked very excited, his words now hurtling one over the other.

"I have got two annas," Gulshan said. "Don't change the rupee." And he threw the two annas at the coolie, saying: "Now run away, my friend, and don't make any fuss. The Sahib is in a hurry."

'I wish I had done to the man what Gulshan did at the very start, and there wouldn't have been any unpleasantness, but I was boiling with fury. "Go now and get out of my sight, otherwise I shall hand you over to the police," I said.

Gulshan was also going to the Court and he shared the tonga with me, and, though I insisted on paying the fare, he said I had no change and he paid at the end of the journey.'

After saying this, Latif laughed, a half-embarrassed, half-real chuckle. Then he became silent and sat with his head bent down shamefacedly, glancing at me from the pupils of his eyes and open-

ing his lips as if to ask me something, to ask my opinion, my verdict on this affair. And I felt that he expected me to be kind to him and yet admonish him exactly as he had himself done while narrating the incident, now being kind to himself and justifying his behaviour, now admitting his guilt. But there was a pause as I was too embarrassed to say anything. At length, with an effort that made his words tremble, he broke the silence and burst out almost hysterically:

'I couldn't argue my case in Court. My words seemed to get stuck in my throat like jagged-edged knives, and my mind kept forgetting the points. I was so confused....'

'And now, I don't know, but I can see that coolie arise from behind my head before my eyes, his blood-streaked eyes, bending over his joined hands, crying and whining and protesting like a black wasp into my ear, whining....'

'And at times to-day I have felt he was following me about. Ugly monolith of a man. Threatening me. With his outstretched, demoniac claws. Threatening me. Threatening me. Just threatening me. A dirty, uncouth creature! Threatening me....'

A Promoter of Quarrels

(To Balraj and Damyanti Sahni)

'It is a furlong if you stand, two miles if you sit, and six if you eat,' said Basanto.

'The angry man listens to no one,' said Hiro.

And they crouched impatiently a few yards away from the shop of Lalla Nanak Chand, confectioner, with their pitchers of milk before them as they assembled the colourful rags of their clothes round them in the early wintry cold of the hills. They were cowherd women who had travelled through the dawn uphill from the

village in the valley by which they lived in a nomadic colony under the trees.

'Yes, this one has eaten the deaf man's sugar,' Basanto said, with a disgust which gathered the wrinkles of her forty years into an ugly knot on her face.

'He has got plenty of sugar, Aunt,' said Hiro, looking greedily at the sugar-plums, jalebis, the cream cakes and crude sugar candy which lay tier above tier on Nanak Chand's counter, open to the attacks of the lean and hungry flies.

'What food to the hungry? What pillow to the sleepy?' Basanto said. 'Child, it is not in our luck to eat such delicacies. The other day when I asked Nanak for a bit of sugar candy for your cousin, he said: "It is a rupee a seer, how many annas-worth do you want?" And, of course, I took my own face and went away, for what is there to stop the mouth from eating a rupee-worth once you begin to buy? I had wanted a little gift to sweeten the mouth of my boy....'

'I have forgotten how to eat sweetmeats,' said Hiro. 'It is such a long time since I tasted a sugar-plum.'

'I will buy some to-day. I have brought some extra milk to pay for the sweets.'

'Come, come and show me the milk, Basanto. Hiro, come, come, hurry up,' said Nanak. 'The Sahibs will be waiting for their tea: you don't know that the goras have their breakfast in bed.'

'Come, Aunt,' said Hiro eagerly, and lifted the pitcher on to her head with her young arms.

'Give me a hand, ni, before you rush away,' said Basanto. 'I know you are in a hurry to eat the rice cakes, but help an old woman. And, anyhow, I am first; you weren't born before I began to sell milk to Nanak.'

'Come, come, don't fight,' shouted Nanak, the gold rings in the lobes of his ears shaking with the force he put into his words.

Hiro lowered the pitcher from her head to the earth and helped Basanto with her vessel. Then she took the opportunity to untie

a knot of her apron in which she had been saving coppers and, emptying them into her hand to buy some sweets, lifted her pitcher and took it nearer to Nanak Chand's counter.

'I want my account settled, Sethji,' said Basanto, as she lowered her pitcher of milk. 'We are moving down to the plains with our cattle as the winter has come; we were drenched in the rain last night as the trees are not much protection; and we have to pay the grazing tax to the Sarkar before we can leave, or they will take our clothes off.'

'You should have a house built,' said Nanak.

'We are not rich Seths like you,' Basanto said.

'Good work: good pay,' said Nanak.

'Good pay: good work,' put in Hiro.

'You, you are worth a lakh of rupees,' said Nanak. 'You can get the pay without the work.'

'Why, I haven't even been able to get the gift of a sugar-plum all this time,' said Hiro, and she threw her apron over her head modestly.

'You can fill a glutton's stomach, but you can't fill her eyes,' said Basanto, who was jealous of the Seth's attention to Hiro. 'Are you eating rice cakes or bargaining? Here, take the milk. Where is your servant to-day?'

'Ohe, where are you? Ohe, Munsha Singha,' called Nanak, scratching himself between the loins.

'Ayaji,' a pale young Sikh boy answered, with his head bent and his chin thrust back in abject humility. 'The cauldron is cleaned and ready.'

'Come and take their pitchers and pour them into the cauldron — there, where the cauldron is; don't be fetching the huge thing here,' said Nanak.

And as Munshi came, showing his ribs and knees through his torn long tunic and pyjamas, Nanak heaved his bottom-heavy body from the greasy cushion on which it rested and went into the black cavern of the shop, saying: 'I will get the leavings of yesterday's boiled milk for you two cowherd women.'

'Why, aren't there any dogs in this bazaar to throw them to?' said Basanto. 'You have never given anything worth-while away.'

'Ohe, Munshi, keep Hiro's milk separate to take to the Sahibs and pour Basanto's into the pan,' said Nanak as he retreated.

'Attend to my pitcher first, vay kaka,' said Basanto to Munshi. 'I have to get back to my children. Look at the sun soaring. Have you ever seen a day going? The cattle must be waiting to go out. And I have to collect the money from your master....'

'What difference do halt and march make to a beggar?' said Hiro, with a dumb humility. 'Take my aunt's milk first, Munshi.'

'Wait till you grow up, my girl,' said Basanto. 'You will have to work and rear children on nothing. Now you eat the bread of illegality from your parents and they eat the bread of illegality by getting you, with your youth, to run errands for them shamelessly. I wouldn't let my daughter sit about in the Bazaar, open to every one's gaze, talking and joking and laughing with all these lewd shopkeepers, who put the price of your body at a lakh. A young girl like that, fancy, sisters. I don't know what the world is coming to! In my time . . .'

While Munshi was carrying Basanto's pitcher of milk into the shop Hiro heard a loud splash of—what was it—water? And then she saw Seth Nanak Chand emerging with the leavings of yesterday's boiled milk in an open brass pot.

'Ohe, bring the cauldron out after you have poured the milk and bring the thermometer,' shouted Nanak Chand to the servant. 'You can't see anything in the dark there.'

'Give me an annaworth of sugar candy,' said Hiro, showing the four pice in her hand to Nanak.

'Throw the pice,' said Nanak, with the scrupulosity of the Hindu. And he weighed the sweets in the scales and poured them into a piece of wastepaper and threw the parcel at the virgin 'worth a lakh of rupees.'

Munshi brought the cauldron, straining every muscle of his body to keep the unwieldy thing from upsetting. His pale face flushed

as he succeeded in balancing it on the fireplace by Nanak's greasy cushioned counter.

'Where is the meter?' Nanak asked, fumbling for the instrument on the dust-covered greasy wall behind the door. And he ordered the panting Munshi: 'Come, now, pour the other pitcher into that tin, for the khansamah boy will be coming.'

At length he found the meter. He wiped it with an end of his dirty loin-cloth and dipped the instrument into the milk.

'So you have taken to deception, have you, Basanto?' he said.

'Why?' exclaimed Basanto.

'Why, is there anything wrong?' asked Hiro, tying the sweets in an end of her apron.

For a moment Nanak paused with deliberate theatricality and made his grim face grimmer. Then he said: 'There is water in this milk.' And screwing his face into a knot of anger, he turned to his servant: 'Bring the other milk here too, ohe, Munshi.'

The boy fetched the cauldron containing Hiro's milk and Nanak dipped the meter into it.

'There is something black in the pulse!' said Hiro, trying to connect the splash of water which she had heard on Nanak's retreat into the shop and the discovery of water in Basanto's milk.

'Acha, there is something black in the pulse, my fair one!' Basanto burst. 'There is something black in the pulse! Eh! Only the crow understands the crow's language! How dare you talk of me like that? May nothing remain of you! May your face be cursed by the black pox! How dare you say that I have brought diluted milk to the market! How—'

'Auntie, I am not saying anything against you. Why do you begin to abuse me? Look, he is judging my milk there, too....'

And she turned to Nanak. 'You daren't say that there is water in my milk, you dare not, Seth, for I milked the cows myself.'

'I don't know how you do it,' said Basanto, before Nanak gave his verdict about Hiro's milk. 'I know how you can make the cows drink water before you milk them, if you don't put water into the pan! Taking the bread out of my children's mouths!'

'Yes,' said Nanak, 'this is very thin, and something has been done to the milk though the meter can't detect it. . . .'

'No, Sethji, it can't be!' protested Hiro. 'On the oath of God, on the oath of my father and mother, on the oath of those who are dearest to me there is no water in my milk.'

'And there is in mine, you bitch!' shouted Basanto. 'Go like the dog! Come like the cat! Go, go, eater of your masters. May that father of yours die and leave your mother a widow! May you become an orphan! May you all die! I shall buy up Nanak's shop and distribute sweets when you all disappear from this world!'

'Ni, come to your senses, Auntie,' Hiro said. 'You silly old woman, why do you want to cut my throat? A single stick will neither burn, nor light, nor shine. You should rage against that promoter of quarrels, there! . . .'

'I will call the policia there and hand you over if you call me a promoter of quarrels,' said Nanak, working up into a bluff rage. 'You quarrel among yourselves, you low cowherd women, and put the blame on me. How dare you be so insolent?'

'You dare to call the policia,' said Hiro. 'I will spit on you. I know what you do when you go inside; Aunt Basanto doesn't.' Her rage stifled her speech. And she flushed an indignant red at the callous and deliberate roguery of the Seth and the machinations with which he had built himself a protuberant belly and a palace in the city, for he himself had told her some of the tricks of the trade in a moment when he wanted to win her confidence, and her body, but the dumbness of generations of servitude prevented her from saying anything.

'Of course Aunt Basanto doesn't know anything, and you do, you upstart!' said Basanto. 'Do I need a mirror to wash my hands with? You, whore! So you have been inside. And you can talk. But some talk and use their tongues while I use my hands.'

And she leapt at Hiro with her claws outstretched and, tearing the rag of apron from the girl's head, pulled her hair, and dug her nails into her neck, shouting the while: 'I will comb your matted hair with a firebrand, you bitch! You daughter of a pimp and a

whore! I will pour the boiling water of my rage on your head! I will eat you alive!

Munshi rushed between them and tried to separate them.

'Leave them to it, ohe boy, let the thieves kill each other!' Nanak said. 'Eat till you are full, fight till your skull is cracked.'

But the boy parted the two women, dragging Basanto away as she still shouted: 'I will eat her and all her relations! By the Pir, I shall eat her....'

'Whether you eat or not, the mouth of that wolf there is dreadful,' said one of the crowd, which had gathered round to see the *tamasha*, in a hoarse whisper to quieten her.

'He is only encouraging you to fight,' said Munshi, putting his hand on the corner of his mouth to deflect his voice. 'He put...'

But Nanak was within audible distance and was staring with his furtive eyes, so that the boy could not tell her that it was his master who had put the water into the milk, and that her companion meant nothing more when she said she saw something black in the pulse but that she suspected he had done the trick when he went in.

'Acha, settle my account,' said Basanto, a glimmer of the truth dawning upon her through Munshi's whisper.

'Sweet and brakish are all one price,' said Nanak, 'and that means no price.... I don't know when you have given me bad milk and when you have given me good milk. But I know that I have had to pay the policia good money in order to prevent him from taking me to the lock-up. Now they will catch the real culprits, because each of you has accused the other before my servant and all the people here....'

'Oh, Seth Nanak Chand, give her the money and end this row,' said a neighbouring shopkeeper in the crowd.

'Yes, yes, give them the money and let them go,' said another man.

'No, no, they are thieves,' said Nanak.

'Ohe, come, Lalla Nanak Chand, let them go,' said a neighbouring grocer who still sat in his shop.

'Acha, now you bitches,' said Nanak. 'I think it charity on my part that I give you a rupee each for the milk which you have supplied me with this month, though I could have handed you over to the *policia*. . . .' And he threw a silver coin to each of them out of his rusty iron cash-box.

The women were dumb. They had exhausted themselves quarrelling and hadn't the breath to haggle.

'Go, go now, before I call the *policia*.'

'Go, go, the black crow will only yield black milk,' said a kindly neighbour.

'Go, go, the cash tenant needs no sponsor,' said another man.

They picked up the coins gingerly. Then Basanto said to Hiro: 'Come, child, he eats eight bowls of milk and sixteen sugar-plums, while we eat the dust and drink the blood of our livers. . . '

'Yes, Auntie, there will be no grief at his death, except among the crows,' Hiro answered.

And they 'took their own faces' and walked away.

Babu Bulaki Ram

'Has the Karnel Sahib come into the office?' inquired Babu Bulaki Ram nervously as he braked his push-bike and alighted awkwardly.

'No, Babuji, not yet,' answered Bachitar Singh, the grey-bearded Sikh sepoy orderly.

Babu Bulaki Ram hurried, in spite of this reassuring answer, leaning his bicycle against the iron railing around one of the young trees which had recently been planted along the dusty drive to the bungalow. The greater part of the bungalow served as Colonel Pottinger's (the Recruiting Officer's) residence, and a part of it was relegated to the Recruiting Office for the various brigades in

the Lahore Division. The steel frame of the cycle would not rest against the cage, for the law of gravity, as indeed all other laws of a balanced existence, seemed to have been completely upset this morning. He must have seen a cat's face first thing this morning: for his wife had sulked; he had cut his chin shaving in the lightless bathroom; the meal hadn't been ready in time; he had nearly slipped on the slime near the sweeper's dung-dump at the end of the lane; and he had almost fallen as he slow-cycled to wait for two tongas to cross the narrow Bazaar beyond the Golden Mosque. Things like this had been happening to him frequently of late. . . .

In placing his bicycle against the railing the machine slipped out of his hands as if it were alive and fell with a crash against his legs.

'The horse is very obstinate this morning, Babuji,' said the orderly, and ran forward, anxious to help.

Babu Bulaki Ram bent over his grazed knee and caressed it with his hand. Then he raised his head to the orderly and smiled embarrassedly. As he was recovering from the blow, however, he saw the trail of black grease in a long smear on his khaki shorts, and he frowned to think that the Colonel might reprimand him for not coming to the office in clean clothes if he saw it. He took off the goggles he wore to guard against the blinding glare of the sun and made sure that it was not too big a spot and could be washed. And, affecting a casual air, he lifted his hand to wipe the sweat that was flowing down his face.

As he walked through the verandah towards his office he found his way barred by Udhamp Singh, the slight, loose-bellied assistant clerk with a nanny-goat beard, who was greeting him with a laugh:

'If you cannot cure wounds, at least do not make them worse,' said Babu Bulaki Ram, his hard, lined face knotted with exaggerated seriousness. 'What is the time? Has the Karnel Sahib come in? The rape of its mother, my watch has stopped and I have sent it to be mended.' He was irritated by his subordinate's familiarity now, though he had encouraged it at other times, and cut him short.

'Only eight-thirty,' said Udhamp Singh, looking at his cheap wrist-watch under the starched cuff of the white cotton shirt

dirtied by the grease of the profuse sweat that oozed from his hairy body. 'Karnel Sahib is probably having his hazri with that parrot-nosed memni of his,' he said, and continued, with a direct peasant humour: 'If you were not such a miser, Babu Bulaki Ram, you wouldn't ever get into trouble. What can you expect if you buy a cheap Japani watch and a cheap Japani bicycle?'

'He howls like a dog if we are not on time,' said Bulaki, ignoring his colleague's joke. 'I thought I was late. The sun seemed to have risen high.'

'No, don't you care for the limp lord, Babu Bulaki Ram,' assured Udhamp Singh, with the free, extravagant carelessness of the yokel. 'You are a head clerk. You—'

'Have you written those letters to Army Headquarters I asked you to draft?' asked Bulaki drily. 'Or have you been trifling like a fool all the time?'

'Oh, I will get them done, Babu Bulaki Ram,' Udhamp Singh said hastily. And then, joining his hands to Bulaki with mock humility, he said: 'You know, I can't write this Angrezi tongue. Will you do something for me? I will stand you a large peg at Lorang's. Will you correct my drafts if I write them? I have been waiting for you.'

'How can I correct your drafts when you haven't even written them?' Bulaki said. 'I expect I will have to write them myself in the end. That's what it will come to.'

'Oh, you are a friend of friends, Babu Bulaki Ram!' said Udhamp Singh, embracing the head clerk. 'Oh, you are the most learned man! You are the greatest man in the whole Indian army!'

'Oh, let go, let go,' protested Bulaki. 'Your mouth smells of garlic, and your sweat stinks!' And, extricating himself from Udhamp Singh's grasp, he entered his office. It was a big white-washed room, with a table covered with files in wire trays and pans and ink bottles, clips and red tape. In the middle there was a cupboard with an Ordnance Survey map on one side and an optical chart with a series of dots on the other.

He switched on the current for the electric fan which was

suspended from the ceiling, sank into his chair, paused for breath, took off his turban and, putting it on a tray, began to wipe the sweat under his hair and neck with an agility that made the ritualistic tuft-knot on the top of his head dangle from side to side.

'What a life!' he muttered impatiently, resting back a while to cool down under the fan before opening the morning's mail. And he felt relieved. All this hurry to get here and the Colonel was not in the office yet. . . . And he had had to rush through his meal. And that Udhamp Singh was a good-for-nothing fool. Expecting him to do all his work! The fellow had no qualifications for the job. And yet he, Bulaki, couldn't refuse to help him, since Udhamp Singh's uncle, who had been a head clerk here, had recommended Bulaki for promotion on the strict understanding that he would connive at Udhamp Singh's incompetence. Now he, Bulaki, had to bear the brunt of it all, for the Colonel shouted at him for Udhamp Singh's faults. It was unfair. . . .

He reached for the letters which were waiting to be opened, but felt his hand shaking involuntarily and sat back.

It's enough to give one an ague—the fear of this big, bloated Karnel Pottinger, who would soon be coming to the office and barking his head off. . . . Why did he shout so? Especially since he had come back from leave in England. He had been all right before. He had got him an increase in pay before he went and had said he would recommend him for promotion to the rank of Jamadar. What had happened to him since he had come back? He had even been all right for some time after his return. He had brought him a fountain-pen from England. Then something seemed to have happened to him suddenly. . . . He wondered if someone had been back-biting. Or was it the growing wave of political agitation and the success of Congress getting on his nerves. He had hinted that he didn't like Army servants to be living in a civil area which swarmed with agitators. . . . They discussed things at the club. They were scared at the introduction of the new Constitution. They hated all Indians. Just because Congress was always agitating, and it was composed of Indians, so all Indians, whether they were

agitators or simple mindless folk, were seditious and suspect. They must be watched and spoken rudely to, insulted and kept in their place. . . . But what could he do? There were so many jobless people about. And these English knew it. Bulaki recalled how the Colonel had turned on Udhamp Singh one day and said: 'I can get a hundred M.A.'s and two hundred B.A.'s for twenty rupees. So buck up and get down to it, old boy, or you will be fired.' That was what he was afraid of. The Sahib might turn on him, too, one day and say the same thing. He had had experience, of course, and he could work better than an M.A. of nowadays. But why couldn't he give in his resignation before anything like that happened? He had written a resignation some days ago for such an eventuality and kept it in the drawer there ready to deliver.

He stretched his hand to open the drawer, but then withdrew it. What would people say if he gave up service and opened a shop?

'Ishwar!' he said, and, turning to the mail, began to sort the letters into official, semi-official, personal for the Colonel, for the Medical Officer, etc.

There was a personal letter for him from his father. He reached for the regulation penknife with the flat wooden handle and began to cut the flap of the letter open, half apprehensive at the rebukes and remonstrances it would contain if his father had found out that he had given another fifty rupees to his mother-in-law under pressure from his wife. But before he had cut the edge Udhamp Singh came in and, twisting his face into a look of the most abject humility, said:

'Babu Bulaki Ram, Babu Bulaki Ram, may I disturb you for a second?'

'Oof God!' Bulaki cursed, gathering the lines of his face impatiently. 'What a nuisance you are! Now what do you want? You have made my life unbearable!'

'Oh, forgive me, Babu Bulaki Ram,' said Udhamp Singh, joining his hands ingratiatingly. 'Forgive me for disturbing you, but

you said the other day: "Write like the learned, talk like the masses—”

'And you do the opposite,' interrupted Bulaki, half angry, half sarcastic. 'You talk like the learned and write like the masses. . . . When shall I be rid of this affliction? You are like a leech, sticking to my flesh and sucking the life out of me!'

'Now, in order to write like the learned,' continued Udhamp Singh, affecting to be a fool to escape his chief's displeasure, 'in order to write like you, Babu Sahib, for instance, one has to have large-size foolscap paper embossed with the seal of the Sarkar Bahadur. . . . So would you, could you, do me the favour, the courtesy of giving me, your humble servant and colleague, your younger brother, some clean sheets and—'

'I suppose you have ruined the paper I gave you yesterday,' said Bulaki. 'Now, really, Babu Udhamp Singh, this can't go on for ever. You have no right to waste Government property like this. I shall have to answer the Karnel Sahib, not you. . . .'

'Oh, Babu Bulaki Ram,' said Udhamp Singh, persistent and unashamed, 'forgive me for this once, just this once, and I shall never repeat this misdemeanour again. You are a good brother, come. And, afterwards, I am only going to trouble you once more to-day, and that is when I ask you to correct my drafts.' And he brought the 'waters of humility' to the corners of his mouth.

'You are the limit,' burst out Bulaki. 'You are not going to waste good official paper to write drafts which have to be corrected again; you should do it on some waste paper.'

'Then give me some waste paper,' said Udhamp Singh. 'Please.'

'Oh God,' fumed Bulaki. 'Can't you find any somewhere? Acha now, take this signaller's pad and write on it. . . .'

'And some foolscap sheets, too, to revise on,' added Udhamp Singh; 'please, I touch your feet.'

'All right, don't eat my head,' said Bulaki, putting his hand into the hip-pocket of his shorts and fishing for a bunch of keys.

'And a new Koh-i-noor pencil, Babu Bulaki Ram,' put in Udhamp Singh, like a child. 'And some ink, too, please. . . .'

'You won't get anything,' said Bulaki half humorously, stiffening at his assistant's demands.

'Oh come, come,' begged Udham Singh, now approaching Bulaki and pressing his shoulders, his arms, his legs, his feet, in a show of importunate beggary.

'Oh, don't do it, don't. Go away, Sikha!' said Bulaki, laughing and crying. 'Have your senses left you?' And he proceeded to unlock the drawer of his table in order to fetch the keys of the cupboard in the opposite wall in which the stationery was kept locked.

While he was doing so, Bachitar Singh, the orderly, came in and announced:

'Babuji, Sheikh Muhammad Din, contractor, has come.' He wants to see the Karnel Sahib about repairs in the bungalow.'

'Oh!' Bulaki said, flustered at having to attend to several things at once. 'Let me settle this fool here and then I will see Sheikh Muhammad Din. God! I haven't even opened the mail yet!'

'Sheikh Sahib is waiting in his tonga,' said Bachitar, conscious of his duty and rather stupid. 'What may I tell him, Babuji?'

'Oh,' said Bulaki, deliberating for a moment and then looking at the army timepiece before him: 'Go and see if the Karnel Sahib has come into his office, and if he is in, ask Sheikh Sahib to go in and see him; he has met the Sahib before.' And he proceeded to attend to Udham Singh.

Bachitar Singh advanced on tiptoe towards the door leading to the Colonel's office, peeped in, came back and whispered: 'Yes, Babuji, the Sahib is at the table.'

'Oh, is he?' said Bulaki, lowering his voice to the softest tone. 'I wonder why he didn't call me to ask for the letters.... But... show Sheikh Muhammad Din in.' And he stooped to shed his shoes on the red-brick floor, according to the habit he had formed through the fear that the sound of his footsteps might disturb the Sahib.

'Now that I think of it, I want some carbon paper too,' said Udham Singh as Bulaki got up, walked to the cupboard and began to stretch his hands into its various shelves.

'Oh you—you want my life!' muttered Bulaki.

'Salaam, Babu Sahib,' shouted Sheikh Muhammad Din, immaculate in white robes and with a rich henna-dyed beard, entering Bulaki's office with the characteristic *bonhomie* of one Punjabi meeting another.

'Sh!' Bulaki greeted him and, lifting the forefinger of his right hand to his lips, pointed to the Colonel's office and whispered: 'It is about the redecoration of the bungalow, Sheikh Sahib, isn't it? The Karnel Sahib is in the daftar. So you can go in.'

'Hacha, Huzoor . . .' said the contractor, flattering the Babu with the true instinct of the business man who would, in other circumstances, have called Bulaki a lentil-eating Hindu. 'I shall talk to you about two or three things later.'

'It is very kind of you,' said Bulaki. 'I should like to see you before you go.' And he veiled the implication about negotiations for his commission on the contract in a smile of faked courtesy.

The contractor disappeared into the Colonel's office through the door, while Babu Bulaki Ram turned to give Udhamp Singh the stationery he needed.

'These Muslas are completely faithless,' said Udhamp Singh. 'I should get him to give you the cash before he starts the job. I wish I had known that the Karnel Sahib had this scheme of redecoration in mind. I would have got a Sikh brother, Sardar Buta Singh, to come and secure the contract. He would have given us the commission we wanted.'

'Yes, these rapers of their daughters,' said Bulaki. 'They are getting everything. They stick together and help each other. And, of course, the Sarkar is winning them over with favours because it is carrying out the policy of divide and rule.'

'You should have got the cow-eater to settle your fee before you let him have an audience with the Sahib.'

'It doesn't matter,' said Bulaki, 'I am not greedy. Only I hope he doesn't go giving the Sahib a basket of fruit to get his own son or someone else my job.'

'Oh, but Babu Bulaki Ram,' said Udhamp Singh, 'there can be no question of that! . . .'

'Do you want some nibs?' Bulaki asked, for now his vanity was tickled and he was inclined to be more generous.

'If the heavens fall, we will catch pigeons,' said Udhamp Singh heartily. 'You give me some, Babu Bulaki Ram. I would like to give them to my little brother who goes to school in the village, and I shall—'

'Sh! . . .' Bulaki cut him short, pricked his ears and listened.

A crash. . . .

Bulaki went pale and strained his ears to listen.

There was a reverberating groan like the snorting of a sick man in pain and then, suddenly, the rustling of forms as if in a scuffle, and, in a dread moment, the weight of the contractor's corpulent form fell headlong into Bulaki's office.

Bulaki stood tense with fear without moving an inch, his legs shaking in spite of himself, his face wrought with a ghastly terror.

Udhamp Singh rushed forward to where the contractor had fallen.

For a protracted moment Bulaki thought he saw the Colonel's face appear at the door, burning red with fury, giving him a fierce look, and he heard him shout: 'Who sent this man into my room?' And then the face disappeared, fuming, and everything about Bulaki swirled in the air and he felt himself sinking into oblivion before the Sahib's stare. And in the delirium of this moment the shadow of his fear projected itself into space like a relentless terror—a blur of pink and purple, without shape, but real, tangible. He tried to reassure himself, as he could feel the hard bricks under his feet. But he could not move as he still felt the Colonel's presence incarnate in the air of the doorway.

'Babu Bulaki Ram, come and help to lift Sheikh Sahib,' said Udhamp Singh in an ordinary tone.

The doom over Bulaki's head melted in the deep-wrought furrows on his forehead. He swept the perspiration off his face

with his sleeve and stood dazed and empty, his heart beating and his breath flowing into the drowsy air about him like a fever in the senses.

He opened his mouth to ask what had happened, but his throat was dry and he could not utter a word. He stepped forward in order to go and see what had happened, but his legs shook as if they would give way if he moved farther. . . .

He leant by the cupboard, the mainspring of his will broken and defeated by the look he thought he had seen in the Colonel's face, and he sought to give his failing frame the dignity of the composure which it had lost. He tried to present a cool front of righteous defence to the Sahib and muttered under his breath: 'I will give in my resignation.'

Then he looked at the contractor, who was getting up with the help of Udhamp Singh.

'What happened, Sheikh Sahib?' Udhamp Singh asked Muhammad Din as he restored the contractor's turban which had come undone and helped to dust his clothes.

'Oh, nothing, Sardarji!' the contractor said as he hurriedly began to wind the folds of his head-dress while Udhamp Singh held its loose length.

'But still, what happened?' Udhamp Singh asked.

'Nothing, brother. There is no talk,' replied the contractor.

'Salaam, salaam, Babuji . . .' and he flashed past Bachitar Singh, stood hesitatingly for a while, smiled embarrassedly and said: 'I have another appointment in Abbot Road, Babuji, I will get a letter sent to you.' And he went out.

'What happened, Babu Bulaki Ram?' asked Udhamp Singh.

But Bulaki sat in his chair with his head in his hands.

'Why, ohe Bachitar Singh, was the Sahib in the office?' Bulaki ventured in a slow voice, a moment later.

'Babuji, I am not sure, but he is generally in the daftar at this time and, I think, he was there—'

'You only think he was there, you ass,' Udhamp Singh said. 'I am sure that he can't have been in the office, and the contractor

ULLABY

went into the Mem Sahib's room by mistake and was frightened. That's why he fell when he rushed back in here. . . .

'I think I saw the Karnel Sahib at the table, Babuji,' said Bachitar Singh, opening his eyes wide with a fervour of insistence to exonerate himself from all blame.

'Do you think the contractor has gone without talking to the Sahib, Babu Bulaki Ram?' Udhamp Singh asked.

Apprehensively Babu Bulaki Ram gazed at the door. Had the Sahib been in the office? What had happened? What would happen? Every nerve in his body twitched as he took the resignation out of the drawer and gazed at it vacantly.

'Please will you fetch me the file of Army Headquarters orders,' he said a moment later.

Lullaby

(To Iqbal Singh)

'SLEEP
 Oh sleep
 My baby, sleep,
 Oh, do not weep,
 Sleep
 Like a fairy . . .'

sang Phalini as she rocked her little one-year-old Suraj Mukhi in her lap, while she fed the machine with handfuls of jute.

Would he ever get to sleep?

'Sleep
 Oh, sleep
 My baby, sleep . . .'

His flesh was so warm. She could feel the heat of his little limbs on her thighs, a burning heat which was mixed with a sour smell.

He must be ill. All day he had not shut his eyes, all day he had sobbed and cried.

The engine chuk-chuked; the leather belt khupp-khupped; the bolts jig-jigged; the plugs tik-tikked; the whole floor shook like the hard wooden seat of a railway train.

And she had to go on feeding the gaping mouth of the machine. 'Bap te bap, why is this bitch barking?' the sharp-tongued woman who sang folk-songs, and could brook no one else singing, called to the other women.

'Sleep,
Oh, sleep....'

Phalini felt her throat growing hoarse with the jute fluff she had been swallowing since she had let the fold of the apron rag, with which she ordinarily padded her mouth and nose in the factory, fall loose. The fluff seemed to be everywhere—on the walls, over the machine, on her face. She could feel it streaming down her nose, her cheeks, to the silver ring round her neck which was green with sweat. She cast her eyes over her nose and felt how ugly it was as it stood out from her hollow cheeks. That is why she had pawned her big silver nose-ring which her mother-in-law had given her in the dowry, and refused to adorn her nostrils even though it was a bad omen to take off your jewellery.

'Ooon...ooon...ooon...' Suraj Mukhi cried. The sharp, feeble cry stirred the black night of Phalini's soul as the air stirs the water, but the child's voice was drowned in the dithyrambic hum of the preparing-shed in the factory.

'Sleep
Oh, sleep
My baby, sleep,
Oh, do not weep,
Sleep.'

she sang, bending over the child's head till she almost touched the feverish brow and kissed the close-fisted hands which Suraj Mukhi

was rubbing on his eyes, even as he cried. And then she threw another handful of jute into the jaws of the monster.

Her own voice sounded to her like the whisper of a broken reed, completely out of tune to-day, as it had seldom been out of tune when she sang the work song:

‘Roller
Roll
Spread jute
Open mouth,
Rise jute
Fall seeds,
Work into cloth.’

Her big troubled eyes roved away from the child to the gaping mouth of the machine, beyond the black, greasy bolts and knobs and pistons, above the fumes of the thick, sickly, tasteless air in the shed.

The engine chuk-chuked; the leather belt khupp-khupped; the bolts jig-jigged; the plugs tik-tikked; the whole floor shook like the hard wooden seat of a railway train.

She felt giddy.

She had felt like that five months before she had given birth to a child: an oily taste in the mouth with a bile under the tongue that seemed to go quivering into the swollen pitcher of her belly and bring the entrails up to her throat. But the quickening under her navel and the memory of her lover’s face seemed to offset the nausea. She tried to think of him now, as he had looked when he first came down from the Northern hills.

The wild, wispy boy with large brown eyes which had flashed when he had talked to her husband, Kirodhar, but which were so shy when he looked at her. Suraj Mukhi’s eyes were like his. Also Suraj Mukhi’s limbs smelt like his. But he would never know that he was the father of the child. Why, he was a child himself. He had come like lightning and gone like the thunder of the Northern hills. . . .

Where had he gone, she wondered. Had he only come to give her the pang of parting? Where had he gone? It was now summer again and he was here last summer. For days she had scanned the horizon of the sky above the city, towards the north in the direction where he had gone. But he didn't seem to be anywhere in the large breathless space. Only Suraj Mukhi lay in her arms. And the sun, after which she had named the child, stood high. And the tears rolled down her scalded face to her chin, across her cheeks, before she realized that she was weeping. . . . Oh, where was he, the gay child, her lover, her baby, so simple, so stubborn, so strong?

'And I shall grow old and grief, not Kirodhar, shall be my Lord. . . .'

'Ooom. . . . Ooom . . .' the child moaned.

The engine chuk-chuked; the leather belt khupp-khupped; the bolts jig-jigged; the plugs tik-tikked; the whole floor shook like the hard wooden seat of a railway train. And she had to go on, feeding the mouth of the machine.

'Bap re bap, what is the matter with the brat? Can't you keep him quiet?' said the woman next to her. Phalini saw him as she had seen him in a dream one day, standing by her side, smiling to her so that she had wanted to clasp him close to her breast. But she had stretched her arms towards him, she had suddenly wakened and found herself groping in the dark towards Kirodhar, who had thought she wanted him and had taken her. He must be somewhere in the far-off hills, doing what? . . . Wandering perhaps, happy and free, while she was caged here with his child.

She bent down to look at the child. His eyes were open, his face was still, he cried no more. That was good, she could feed the machine with more jute.

'Sleep
Oh, sleep
My baby, sleep . . .'

she sang, and she smiled at him and rocked him again. Suraj Mukhi's eyes just stared at her; rigid and hard his little hand lay on the side.

She swayed on her haunches and left the jute.

The effigy lay still.

Dead.

She gave a long, piercing shriek which tore through the ceiling.

She slapped her cheeks and beat her palms on her breast, crying in a weird, hollow voice: 'Hai, hai.'

'Bap re bap, why is she crying, this bitch? What is the matter with her?' said the woman next to her.

'My child, my child, my child . . .' Phalini cried, crazed and agonized as she tore her hair.

The women crowded round her.

'What is the matter?' the forewoman called. 'Why are you bitches running amok?'

The engine chuk-chuked; the leather belt khupp-khupped; the bolts jig-jigged; the plugs tik-tikked; the whole floor shook like the hard wooden seat of a railway train. . . .

The Terrorist

(*To Robert Herring and Oswall Blakeston*)

He casually presented the slip to the sallow-faced English Inspector of Police who stood at the entrance of the Legislative Assembly buildings in New Delhi. He was making an histrionic attempt to look perfectly unsuspicious and ordinary. He pretended to be lost in admiration of the colossal pillared and domed sepulchre of Sir Edwin Lutyens' architectural dreams without knowing anything about the laws of architecture. He thought that the pretence would work.

But there was an uncontrollable tremor on his lips.

Lest the Inspector of Police notice him pursing his lips tight and

lest his bent head arouse suspicion, he brazenly stared straight at the policeman and deliberately waited in that position.

'ADMIT SARDAR BIR SINGH TO THE PUBLIC GALLERY OF THE INDIAN LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY' the ticket read in his mind's eye, and he recalled the childish handwriting in which the signature of Rai Bahadur Sir Gopal Chand was sprawled underneath.

Nobody could find fault with that card. He could not have got a more authoritative guarantor than the Deputy President of the Legislative Assembly. 'And I feel I look perfectly calm,' he said to reassure himself.

All this went through his mind in a flash.

'All right,' said Captain Beatty, alertly looking up to Singh with his hard blue eyes and noticing not the slight tremor on his lips nor the surreptitious manner in which he had lifted his chin, but the face without a blemish; a handsome, wheat-blonde face, with a forehead, shadowed by a khaki polo topee, inflamed by pink-white cheeks, which tapered from the edges of the sharp nose over a regular, expressive mouth down to the chin, whose determination was sadly flawed by the pit of a dimple. 'A Kashmiri Pundit, presumably,' Beatty thought, 'a relative of Sir Gopal Chand or a rich university student.' And he dismissed him from his mind because, except that the boy was handsomer than most, he seemed to Beatty like all the other 'native' students who crowded into the public gallery of the Chamber to hear debates, dressed in Ranken & Co. suits and expensive polo topees; such as he himself could not afford on account of those infernal Whiteway Laidlaw bills for Dorothy's dresses which literally poured in by every mail from Bombay. .

'I hope that Vasu Dev has got in without any difficulty,' Singh said to himself as he walked up the carpeted stairs and approached the gallery. And he looked past the roped gangway, over the heads of the people who had already taken their seats on his left and right. 'Vasu Dev, Vasu Dev . . . no . . . no . . . yes . . . there was Vasu Dev . . . looking . . . yes . . . yes, quite unconcerned . . . there, on the left in the front row. Shabash! Bravo!'

A light negative shock of electricity passed through his body as he felt for the bomb in the pocket of the overcoat hanging on his arm.

He felt faint.

There was the positive impact of the hand-grenade in the pocket.

He recovered his balance.

He had forgotten to take off his hat, as is the European custom on entering the room. He immediately did so, a little flustered that he might have been noticed with it on all that time. In order to offset any critical gaze that might have noticed him he walked on, looking straight on his right with a hard, impenetrable glint in his eyes, as if that were his usual manner of looking at the world.

There was no seat in the front row on the right, except at the extreme end.

'Stupid,' he muttered to himself, 'that is the fruit of being late. If my coat brushes against any of these fools who have come like dogs to hear the old old debates again under the new reforms, the vessel will be broken. I had better pass through the empty seats at the top and get to the edge of the gallery that way.'

He retraced a step, turned right, and walked quickly but carefully past the folded seats. His feet felt marvellously active, his head was clear and light, though his face seemed covered with perspiration.

As he sat down ostentatiously he was afraid of the bomb exploding on his thighs. He caressed his coat lovingly and, putting it down before him gently, drew his trousers to a comfortable fold above his knees. He had never been very keen on preserving a faultless crease.

To avoid the squinting gaze of the man next to him—a Muhammadan with a red fez, frock coat and baggy trousers—he looked into the distance on the left and wondered if he would be able to see Vasu Dev, and whether Vasu Dev would be able to see him, to time the actual throwing of the bombs by signs.

He could not discover Vasu Dev at first glance. He withdrew his eyes. He dared not look left too actively at once. 'Not yet,'

he said to himself. 'I will settle down first and behave as an ordinary visitor.'

He simulated the manner of an eager young man who had come to the Assembly Chamber for the first time in his life, looking as if fascinated at the fake classical frescoes which decorated the lunettes under the Gothic-Mughal-American arches of the vast dome of the Assembly building.

The tempera paintings, executed on a background of gold, described the Hindu seven ages of man: birth, childhood, student life, love, family life, work, renunciation. The decorative floral details surrounding the hieratic medallions did not please him. The unhappiness, the grief, the suffering of all those phases of life which he had seen in the country about him had given a sardonic twist to his thin lower lip, and his eyes looked on at things contemptuously lest his romantic heart illumine them to the beauty of the world, to the joy of life.

But in a large hemisphere before him on the wall under the dome he saw the picture of the Buddha preaching to his disciples. The endless hours during which he had sat at the feet of the Yogis and ascetics in the various religious shrines, when he had had to live in disguise after he looted the Calcutta Mail at Kakori and there was a price of a thousand rupees on his head, and after he had raided the Chittagong armoury, came to his mind. They had taught him the great doctrine of securing release from the trammels of existence exactly as did the Buddha. They had pointed a way beyond suffering, beyond the essential unavoidable abomination of suffering. They had described to him the beauty of death. And now he was going to realize that beauty. Only, they had said that one should wait for the culmination patiently. He differed from them there. Death in action, death for such a noble cause as fighting for the honour of the motherland; that was a glorious death. Even according to the enthusiastic Hindus who believed in being born again and again to bear the oppressive sorrows of life from birth to death, one achieved a greater rebirth by doing great deeds. And Guru Gobind and a hundred other saints of his own religion,

Sikhism, had achieved martyrdom by fighting against foreign rule. 'Shanti, Shanti,' Peace, the holy men used to say, and truly the Buddha in that picture looked the very embodiment of peace; but, he wondered, had the Buddha known the glory of sacrifice in war? Those Communists were right when they talked of revolution, but why did they believe they would become immortal on earth when all religions have taught that immortality is to be achieved only in heaven? Theirs was the militant optimism of materialists and sensualists. They believed that suffering was not inevitable, that they could end it. But they would only conquer the whole world and lose their own souls. No. Death is the only way of securing release from the trammels of existence. All things end in death. 'If India had been free I would like to have waited for death in peace. As it is, I must die in battle. And the battle is going to rage now.'

His gaze fell on the red plush of the curtains on the tall doors of the Chamber with the hated symbol of the British crown embroidered on them in gold. 'Those curtains are the colour of blood, blood when it has dried,' he said, with a malice born of revenge, which seemed to find a morbid delight in the mysticism of blood, in the pure joy of violence, destruction, and annihilation. 'I wonder if they were deliberately chosen to be of that colour by the government which has won India by the sword and wants to keep it by the sword, chosen by my enemies who believe in bloodshed as I do. Well, soon I shall dye this whole Chamber in the colour of blood. That will be a fit answer to the insolence of these British!'

He felt the blood rise in his veins and colour his face with the wild flush of pride at these thoughts, the flush of pride and power and glory.

He recalled that he had experienced this feeling always at the most critical times in the short history of his life when he was about to kill someone or commit a robbery. He had felt it, for instance, before he shot one of the most prominent police officials at Lahore, and when he had exhorted the crowd at Sholapur to avenge themselves on the British by an open insurrection. It was a

beautiful feeling, subtle and warm, like the intoxication of wine. It made one confident and strong. . . .

The thud of awkward feet shambling down into the empty rows of the gallery, the shifting and shuffling of those who were already seated and made room for the newcomers peevishly or with exaggerated courtesy, disturbed his thoughts and annoyed him.

'Fools!' he muttered, 'fools!' And he tried to ignore them by looking around.

A row of scarlet-complexioned Englishmen in frock coats, white shirts and those 'handkerchief' ties (with the pearl pins) which he had never been able to tie, were coming into the distinguished visitors' gallery, with their wives and daughters, looking superior in silver-fox furs. 'No Indians?' his heart asked, 'no Indians among them?' 'No Indians there,' his eyes brought back the answer. His soul rose in a fit of indignation at the insult he thought implicit in this. 'Why are there no Indians in the distinguished visitors' gallery?' he asked. 'Aren't there any Indians left who can defend their honour against such insults? They should make it a point to be there, even if only to keep up the prestige of India before these red-faced monkeys. Surely they are allowed to go in there.'

In the press gallery, beyond the distinguished visitors' gallery, however, he could see two Indians seated beside an Englishman. That was gratifying. 'Though, of course,' he said to himself, 'they must be representatives of the Associated Press of India, which is an English organization.'

A stream of politicians was entering the Chamber past the head chaprasi of the Assembly, whose flowing grey beard wagged over the golden braid of his long red coat every time he greeted a celebrity.

'Fools! Fools! They let themselves be hoodwinked into believing that they now control the destiny of their country,' he muttered. 'They are just like buffaloes and bullocks, the bloated idiots with bored faces!'

He hated them with a hatred of youth's fire against middle-aged indifference.

'Fools! Fools! Bigger fools, those Swarajists! Even they have

been taken in by the British.' He fumed inside himself to see some of the sombrely clad members of the Swaraj Party shaking hands with Sir James Ferguson, the Home Secretary, with cordial smiles on their lips. 'Time servers!' he said. 'Opportunists! They only joined the Congress because they wanted to get into the Assembly and to get jobs for their relatives! Traitors!' His feverish eyes explored the faces of the Dishonourable Members even against his will.

There, there was that black Madrasi lawyer and traitor, Law Member of the Government of India, Sir Krishnaswami Iyer, in his small child's turban, embroidered with gold, and a tight, ill-fitting navy-blue suit, looking more like a scavenging crow than ever with his long, polished nose.

'And there, entering the door, was that rich Parsi traitor, Sir Dadiji Maneckji Bottlewala, in English morning dress and a pointed French beard—typical member of the community which fancies itself more English than the English.'

And there was that illiterate, hawk-nosed, fanatical Muhammadan camel of the desert, son of the prophet, Captain Sir Nasarullah-Khan, flaunting the tail-end of his turban and his military uniform.

'Traitors! Traitors!' he muttered in disgust. 'Traitors! I wish I could blow them up at once. But wait till they have arranged themselves! I will upset them!'

His eyes fell on the beautiful white face of Lalla Dwarka Prashad Sharar, the leader of the Congress Party, the folds of whose home-spun tunic and loin-cloth fell gracefully on his body like those of the Roman statues in the Lahore Museum. He admired that man. He would have liked to have been like him. He would have liked to have been his son so that he could have inherited the mantle of that distinction which raised the Lalla to the eminence of a virtual symbol of India. He recalled the occasion when he had first heard the great man speak at the Calcutta Congress. What an orator! The periods of his speech still rang in his ears. The fire of his incitements had sent him raiding, looting, killing, to revenge the wrongs of India. A member of the official nominated party had come to

speak to the Lalla. Singh withdrew his eyes in disgust at the fool who dared to brush up against his hero.

'I must get ready,' he said to himself.

Before feeling for the bomb in the pocket of his overcoat, however, he leaned over the balustrade before him.

The Chamber was now full, above him, below him, about him.

There was a noise of indistinct talk going on, almost like a blurred whisper, punctuated by chatter.

The atmosphere was congested and warm.

He took a deep breath as if he were suffocating. It seemed to make him shiver.

'It is cold,' he tried to assure himself. 'I must soon get active. Then I shall get warm. I had better try and get ready to signal to Vasu Dev.'

He looked towards the left gallery.

The visitors in the public gallery were craning over the red plush of the balustrade and obstructed his view. He could not see Vasu Dev.

He retreated into himself.

A curious emptiness had taken possession of him. It seemed as if he had ceased to exist. But his face was hot and swollen. His ears felt like red, transparent hot iron. His eyes seemed full of molten lava. He tried to pull himself together and to concentrate on the deed.

He had no capacity for abstract thought left, however. The deed that he was going to perform presented itself to him only as a fact in history, in his own chequered history. It was an incident in his life, the last, final incident in his spectacular career, the act which would crown all his efforts at revolt.

Below, everything seemed ready for the Speaker to come in. He waited anxiously to watch old Mr. Jay Dass Hartal take the chair. 'One of the bravest Indian politicians!' he said in his mind. 'His position as the first Indian President of the Assembly, won after arduous debate, is a glorious victory for the motherland.' He recalled that the sage had blessed him at the Cawnpore Congress. 'I wonder if he knew that I believed in shedding blood,' he asked

himself. 'Still, he was kind to me, even though he had the liberal's horror of taking life. It would be a pity if he were killed when I drop the bomb. But he is old anyway. And I will try to throw the grenade near the official benches.'

No more thoughts came into his head for a moment.

He stared blankly into the air.

Then his glance fell on his knees strongly planted before him, between which lay the overcoat, in the pocket of which was the bomb. His knees began to shake a little.

He diverted his eyes to scan the texture of his overcoat. It was a plain tweed and not stimulating to thought.

He felt as if his head were made of wood which had suddenly become impenetrable to the air.

He shook himself with a slight, hesitant movement of his body and felt as if he were trembling.

Feeling that people about him might become aware of what was going on inside him, he bent his head and looked into his mind's eye.

He felt as if he were shut off from the rest of the world in a dark chamber, alone, a speck of darkness.

But then he became conscious of the presences about him, above all, below him. It was comforting though oppressive.

• He wished he could throw the bomb and be done with it.

He suddenly caught Vasu Dev's eyes.

The unbearded young college boy looked wild and furtive, disturbed yet somehow convincing enough. Yes, he could be depended upon. Had he not drunk water out of the same cup—the symbol of the bitter poison of death? Had he not vowed undying eternal brotherhood and devotion to him, his leader, the liberator of India?

Singh struck the palm of his right hand against his heart and, with his gesture and the movement of his eyelids upwards to heaven, tried to communicate that he loved him and that they were to trust in God above on high and do the right—throw the bombs soon.

It occurred to him in a flash that he had forgotten about the challenge he had intended to utter when he threw the bomb. 'The Challenge! The Challenge!' he said. 'The words which will spread throughout the length and breadth of India like wildfire, words as memorable as those of Proudhon and Mazzini: "I die for my motherland. I become a sacrifice for it. I have tried to avenge Bharat Mata against the devilry of the British!"' He exulted to think that to-morrow these words of his speech would form the headlines of all the newspapers in Hindustan. He had printed the words on leaflets, so that if all died in the Chamber the printed matter would remain. He felt for the papers in the right breast-pocket of his jacket. They were sa . . .

The Speaker entered, his long, flowing beard giving a prophetic dignity to his English wig and gown made of homespun cotton material.

The House rose with a rustle.

The Speaker took his seat on the high, throne-like chair.

The members sat down, shuffling, hustling, bustling, talking, whispering.

For a moment all was still again.

Singh saw, or imagined he saw, the three English ministers at the head of the official benches smiling derisively at the ceremonious looks on the faces of the Indian members, as if they who had created democracy could afford to laugh at the mock heroics of these natives whom they were educating in the methods of debate.

He frowned with resentment at so subtle an insult and nearly pulled out the handkerchief from his cuff to wave to Vasu Dev, which act was the signal for the bombs to be thrown simultaneously.

He tried to calm down, to control himself, to go about the business clearly, coolly, deliberately.

But he could not get over the insult implicit in the derisive smile of the English ministers. He felt hot with exasperation, fumed with rage. The memories of the insults which he had suffered at the hands of the British seemed to come back to him.

His eyes dimmed with a vague emotion which he did not really

feel. He tried to work himself into a towering rage. But his throat seemed parched. He did not know if he would be able to utter the words of his speech when the time came.

The Speaker struck the bell on the desk.

Singh started. His legs seemed to sink beneath him. His heart throbbed violently. His body was perspiring.

He hurriedly put his hand into the pocket of the overcoat and drew out the bomb wrapped in a silken handkerchief.

His heart drummed against his chest now. His temples palpitated. His brain felt dizzy. The words of the challenge seemed to slip through his mind.

He hastily drew the printed leaflets out of his pocket.

His hands were shaking.

He breathed a deep breath, opened his eyes wide, tightened his muscles and prepared to rise.

The Speaker rose.

Singh rose too.

Before the Speaker's eyes had lifted their lids, Singh had flourished the silken handkerchief like a juggler, swept a glance at the Chamber, and thrown the bomb into the air.

'Shoon shut!' The bomb fell at the feet of Sir Arthur Rank, the Finance Minister.

'Hai!' Singh heard a cry like Vasu Dev's.

He looked and saw that the boy had been arrested by those about him with the live bomb still in his hand.

'Ooof! Oh, Heavens! We are dead! Undone!' The cries rose from the Chamber and there was complete pandemonium, the cowardly members rushing from their seats and falling over each other, the braver men standing away from their seats.

'Cowards! I become a sacrifice for the mother . . .' Singh shouted.

The old President called the members to order. But his gaze had soared to the public gallery where two men were being held by several others.

Singh's eyes were blurred by the blood that had risen in them. Fire burned in his brain, the fire of strength. Fire swirled in his

body as he struggled to wrest himself from the grasp of the policemen about him. He was blind with blood.

A sharp slap fell on his face.

His eyes opened and he faced Beatty.

Tinkle! Tinkle! The President rang the bell and called: 'Gentlemen! Gentlemen! The bomb did not explode! Please return!'

'Oh, what evil stars have robbed my instrument of its power!' roared Singh, writhing histrionically.

'Bahin chut! Sir ka bacha! Hosh karo!' shouted Beatty, again striking Singh's face.

Singh turned his other cheek deliberately, histrionically simulating the appearance of Christ on the cross, and shouted: 'If they hit you on the right cheek, turn your left. . . .'

The visitors in the public gallery who had fled when they heard the bomb drop now came crowding round to see the terrorist, with horror-struck eyes and pale faces. As Beatty and two English police sergeants goaded Singh up the stairs with the butt ends of their revolvers he smiled at the visitors, an automatic smile with a willed patriotism behind it. But for all its patriotism it was a ridiculous smile, the smile of a man who puffed his cheeks when he meant to twist his lips, the smile of a youth who had been suddenly paralysed by fear.

'I sacrifice myself for . . .' he roared, but the roar ended in a hoarse whisper.

The policeman dug into his ribs and pushed him forward.

'I . . .' he struggled to say with all the force of his voice.

The word sounded hollow as it struck the dome of the Chamber.



The Interview

(To Dr. and Mrs. Hussain Zaheer)

It was visitors' day at Faridpur Jail.

But, presumably, because Khan Bahadur Sheikh Ahmed Din, the Head Jailer, charged an exorbitant fee, very few people had been able to buy the privilege of a little affection that day. And only three persons waited outside the giant gate with the iron bars for interviews.

One of them was an old peasant, who sat with a load of parcels suspended from a stave which he held across his shoulder. The other was a young woman whose white silk sari fell loosely back from her hair and disclosed a sombre, wheat-blonde face which seemed suddenly tense, for, ordinarily, it would not have shown the slightest trace of self-consciousness, as there was still a twinkle of brightness in the big, brown eyes, even though they seemed to have seen too much. And there was myself.

I remember that I was struck by the contrast between the presence of the weather-beaten, rugged old peasant and this seemingly sophisticated specimen of Indian women of the cities, who change their saris as often as they change their minds and are prone to sit around like dressed-up dolls in badly furnished withdrawing-rooms, eating betel-leaf galore and occasionally abusing their servants into alacrity. For though, as I came up by the District Courts, where small sleek lawyers flocked around large angular peasants, I could have imagined the old man visiting jail because he seemed poor and obviously had a relation residing in the only place where the poor are most welcome, I could not have fancied this young woman here. In spite of the fact that I had come to see Ajit Kumar Sen, who had been languishing in Faridpur Jail without a trial for the past two years with a group of politicals who had been transferred from the Deoli internment camp, jail was still connected in my mind

with criminals, thieves and murderers, with none of whom I could connect this silk-saried young lady.

As I sat down to wait through the hours it takes for the officers of His Majesty's Government in India to negotiate business of any kind, I was made more intensely aware of her presence by my own curiosity, as well as by the attention which the long-mustached, armed warder was paying her; for he stood, rifle in hand, over our heads and fidgeted about, now stamping his feet, now clearing his throat noisily, now striking the butt end of his rifle on the ground, all obviously to attract her attention.

'Ari, at least look this side,' he half coughed and whispered in the surreptitious manner of a naïve young heart-squanderer in the market of love who is still respectable enough not to want to be seen in search of a woman too openly.

The woman moved the cloth on her head, shifted on her seat, fanned her face with an edge of her sari and casually shifted her eyes from one side to the other.

Whereupon the warder took a few steps away from her as if he was going to resume his duty as the sentinel of a hell in which the July sun was pouring down the terrible fury of its afternoon hate. But then he walked back and, affecting to inhale a mouthful of breath, heaved a deep sigh, twisted his long mustachios, as though to restore his pride and take the pallor of chagrin off his face.

Some new convicts were coming up the road behind us from the direction of the District Courts, their iron fetters clanking against their chains as they marched; but as yet there was no sign of Sen beyond the iron gates, in the hall. So I interested myself in the antics of the warder.

Unable to recover his equanimity and conscious, perhaps, that the old peasant and I had seen him make vague overtures to the lady, he sought to cover up his desire by humming a love-tune recently sung by Miss Dulari. But they say, 'Can you cure a heart-ache by changing the pillow?' and from the lack of confidence in his handling of the melody he seemed to be aware of the fact that he had not much of a voice.

The failure of this approach made him resort to indirect speech again.

'Listeners never hear their praise,' he said to the pock-marked Head Warder, who sat near the small entrance in the giant iron gate, on a tall stool by a high desk, a bunch of keys on a huge ring in his left hand as he wrote on a register propped up before him with the right.

At that the pock-marked Head Warder shouted significantly:

'Why! What's the talk? To-day our jail seems to have become a fair. The Moon of Id seems to have arisen on the horizon....' And though his oblique speech referred to the woman, he pointed towards the fresh convicts.

'It is better to be a free bird than a king in prison,' murmured the old peasant, half to himself and half to me as he came to from a moment's doze.

The light-heartedness of the Head Warder and the stir in the air produced by the clanking of the new convicts' fetters encouraged the sentry to believe that his open solicitations might expose him to censure.

'Are, say a word, O Moon of Id, that I may break my fast,' he said loudly. 'I am dying of thirst.'

The woman turned to me and said:

'Do you think we will be granted the interview soon?'

The warder began to sing a verse about rivals before I could answer her.

'I think the time given was half-past two,' I said.

'It is a quarter to four,' she said, looking at her wrist-watch.

'The Khan Bahadur is probably enjoying his siesta,' I ventured.

'This is their way,' the old peasant said, wiping the sweat off his brow with his hand as he lifted his head from where he had sunk it hopelessly in the pit of his interlocked arms. 'Alas for him whose lawyer has become plaintiff....' And he was burr-burring all to himself when the Head Warder came to the small door, applied a key to the lock, pushed the bars, and beckoned to the policeman in charge of the new convicts to enter.

The clanking of the convicts' chains and fetters as they slowly straggled into the hall ahead of the policeman filled the atmosphere again. But when the group had passed behind the bars and sat down by the Head Warder's desk and the old peasant had relapsed into his stupor, the sentry sensed that his 'beloved' was seeking protection in the shadow of my presence and resumed his steps.

'It took me the whole morning to get a special letter from the Parliamentary Secretary to the Home Minister to enable me to interview Ajit Kumar Sen,' I said; 'now it is taking me the whole afternoon.'

'Oh, I am here to see him too,' she said impetuously, her big eyes lighting up. And a smile of pride seemed to come over her face and she modestly drew the end of her sari on to her head.

'What blandishments! What charm! What to say of Lady Beautiful!' mocked the warder from a distance.

And the old peasant snored as sleep pressed on his eyes.

And the chains and fetters of the new convicts clanked as they shifted for comfort where they sat in the hall.

And I gasped for breath as I looked at the woman and away from her, wondering why, knowing that a woman is open to the lewd jokes of policemen, she had come unattended. Then I contemplated the riveted edges of the convicts' fetters as some of them were bandaging their ankles with wisps of cloth and straw.

'I hear they can get books now,' the woman said. 'And papers. And they have planted a bed of flowers, in the shape of a Red Star with the hammer and sickle on it, inside their barracks.'

'Don't they fear the wrath of authority?' I said, and wondered how they could get space to grow flowers in the overcrowded Faridpur Jail.

'There were some among them who were tied to slabs of ice and paralysed,' she said. 'And others who were tortured....'

'I hear they pierced pins under the nails of some of the students in the camps,' I said. She shook her head and twisted her face and closed her eyes as if not to think of the torture.

'Send the new convicts in one by one,' shouted Munshi Dina Nath as he poked his head out of his office on one side of the hall, his tuft-knot dangling a little.

'Eh Daroga Sahib!' I shouted, thinking to catch him before he disappeared for ever.

'Oh, are the visitors still waiting,' he said, with an air of shocked innocence. And he came out of his room shouting at the Head Warder: 'Why did you not remind me that these worthy people are waiting?'

'Huzoor, we were waiting for orders,' said the pock-marked Head Warder. 'I had the political called and ready for the interview; he is just beyond the door, there in the courtyard.'

'Call him into the hall then! Call him here—into this room—Minister Sahib would be angry if he knew that we had kept a representative of the press waiting. And that lady has a special permit.'

The Head Warder hastened towards the inner wooden gate with his keys and, opening the small aperture, he shouted to a convict warder: 'Sultan, bring the political!'

Ajit Kumar Sen had apparently been seated by the inner door waiting for official sanction. The Head Warder opened the door to admit the prisoner into the hall.

The woman got up from where she crouched and proceeded towards the bars of the outer gate. Her eyes were glued to the sunken-checked figure of Ajit, who stood dressed in the fantastic jail tunic and shorts, as he came into the hall.

After the impact of the first strangeness which I felt at not being able to recognize in the stooping prisoner the robust and healthy man I once knew, I waved a greeting.

The warder came up and opened the door in the gate to admit us.

For a moment I waited, partly to look at the old peasant, who still sat neglected where he was under the scanty shade of a sapling near the gate, and to give the woman time to enter.

But she stood staring ahead of her.

'Aiai, come in!' Munshi Dina Nath said. And the Head Warder looked up with all the eyes in his pock-marked face, expectant and obedient.

The woman lowered her eyes from Ajit Kumar Sen's gnarled face and, bending awkwardly, dragged her feet over the doorstep and scurried like a duck into the hall.

But she had hardly gone two, three steps when she stopped as if to collect herself, stretched her hands, lifted her head and stared at Ajit again, her face set in a mould like a bronze, except that her nostrils dilated perceptibly and her cheeks burned with a quivering flame which transfigured her person.

I had entered the hall and stood behind her.

Ajit stood away, rather distant and inert. The whites of his eyes were vague and liquid in the hollows of the deep sockets. The parchment of his face seemed to have contracted and shrivelled, though he seemed calm and invulnerable in the pride of his position as a prisoner.

The Assistant Jailer went rushing round giving orders to the men in his office to clear out of the way.

The Head Warder stood panting and breathless and scanned the faces of the convicts as if he wished they would scatter.

'Aré, who do you want to see, oldie?' the warder outside the gate said to the peasant, now solicitous for his welfare.

'Strange that Satan should reprove Sin,' said the old man.

As we stood in the comparative cool of the Assistant Jailer's room I wondered what ties bound Ajit to the woman—what was he to her and she to him?

But, below my nose, her eyes were open and staring, like those of the blind whose eyes never shut, blind as life, blind as death, blind as love. . . .

A Kashmir Idyll

(To Trilochan Singh and Saeed Hassan)

IT was about ten years ago, during a brief visit to Kashmir, that the incident I am going to relate took place. But neither time nor space has blurred the deep impression it made on me then, and it has haunted me for many days, so that I must needs put it down.

There were originally four of us in the party including myself, the three others being a tall, imposing Sikh gentleman, both tailor-made and God-made; a sensitive young poet, a Kashmiri whose family had emigrated to the plains and made good as Kashmiris always do when once they have left the land where, though nature is kind and generous, man has for centuries most foully and cruelly oppressed man; and a hill boy who cooked for us.

We had loaded our luggage on a tonga and walked the three hundred and seventy-five miles on the road from Jammu across the Himalayas in slow stages, by the beds of the silent Ravi and the surging Chenab. On the peak of the Banihal we had held conversation with the wind that comes from the Kashmir valley, bearing a load of loveliness and pain, the golden exhalation of the saffron and the white sighs of a people who toil unrewarded.

We had descended to the natural spring of Ver Nag from which a few drops of water trickle into a stream that becomes the River Jhelum at Islamabad, where it divides the whole valley into two halves and flows into Lake Wular and then cuts its way through two hundred miles of mountains into the plains.

From Ver Nag, a village of dark and labyrinthine streets full of small mud huts, the multi-coloured flowers on whose roofs give no hint of the misery which dwells within, we had traversed the main valley by a dusty road bordered by cubist poplars and cypresses.

We had made our headquarters in a houseboat at Srinagar. Then, taking the advice of a tourist's guide book which the government

of His Highness the Maharaja of Kashmir had designed specifically for the use of English visitors, though a few Indians also took advantage of it if they had a smattering of the wonderful, official language, we had decided to undertake short trips to the remote valleys and the unspoiled outlying ranges of the Himalayas within the borders of Kashmir.

We visited the Sonamarg valley where the scarlet eyes of the morning are blinded by the glare of the snow that lies perpetually on the mountain peaks, leading through the Zogila Pass to Chotta Tibet, and where the sleep of the night is continually disturbed by the growling of the angry Indus rushing through glaciers and across high rocks and boulders on its tortuous passage across the Punjab.

We pushed by a difficult track across a crumbling mountain to the cave of Amarnath, where the dripping of water from melting crystals form, a snow image of the shape of a phallus, which the superstitious go to worship in thousands at a particular time of the year, believing it to be the penis of the Great God Shiva.

We went to Gulmarg, the valley of wild roses; to Lilanmarg, where the lilies of the field grow for miles and miles and miles, angelic and melancholy. We ascended to Aparwat, the high peak above Gulmarg, on top of which is a crystal-clear pool that echoes back the faintest whisper.

We saw Gandarbal and Hari Parbat, the Shalimar and the Nishat; we went everywhere, devouring the beauty of Kashmir's landscapes, trudging along its byways, loitering among its stars, squandering whole days and weeks in search of exquisite moments.

And then there was nothing left to do except to sail among the waterways of the valley, to seek new harbours for our houseboat in the Dal lake and in the shadows of the various gardens, wherever the caprice of our idle wills directed the heart-shaped oars of our boatmen.

A cousin of the poet of our company, a nobleman and courtier of His Highness the Maharaja, who had sought us out in an obscure corner of the Dal, and showered the blessings of fruit and meat and drink upon us with a generosity that betokened his eminence and

his affluence, offered us the hospitality of an island he possessed near by.

Though grateful for his kindness, we had been finding the gentleman's hospitality rather embarrassing, because it involved us in a friendship with the great man which we could not spontaneously accept. 'For His Grace was rather a silly young man with the manners of a lout and a high blood pressure in his too opulent flesh, so we excused ourselves by saying that we were intending soon to complete our tour of the valley by going in our kitchen-boat to the Wullar. But it was not so easy for us to escape from the tentacles that he spread around us by that slick and sure turn of phrase that had so obviously carried him to his high position at Court. He suggested that if we didn't accept his hospitality he would like to accept our hospitality and accompany us to the Wullar 'in your kitchen-boat for a change, because,' he said, 'I am tired of this grand style in which I have to live, and would like to be one of you.'

We were so bounden to the Nawab Zaffar Ullah, as the worthy was called, for the many favours he had heaped on us that we naturally could not refuse him, even though he became more patronizing and added that not only would he like to come with us, but two of his most intimate friends would like to accompany us also, and that he would like to supply provisions and order extra boatmen for our service on the way.

We were in for it, and we accepted all his offers because it would have been more strenuous to find excuses than to let ourselves become completely ineffectual pawns in his high hands. And, accompanied by him and his friends (a surly little judge of the High Court of Kashmir, and a most superficial young trader in hides and skins), we started one evening.

The shades of night were falling and we floated through the heaven and the earth in a dream as yet slightly disturbed by the Nawab and his companions.

The river flowed, and our boat flowed with it, without much help from our boatman, his wife, his sister, or his little daughter.

But we had hardly retired to the silent places of our heart when dinner was announced.

The Nawab had brought a sumptuous meal prepared by his servants all ready to be served—rice coloured and scented with saffron, curried fowls perfumed with musk, and there were goblets of champagne, bottled in 1889.

Having compromised us into accepting his delicious food, it was only natural that the Nawab should deem it fit to amuse us with the gifts of his speech. He told a few dirty stories and then launched into a discourse of which the ribaldry was so highly spiced with a deliberate obscenity that whoever felt nauseated or not, I, at least, who have never been over-righteous, turned aside, thought of the pride of my emotions, made my words the stars and surrendered myself to the bosom of the night.

When we awoke at dawn our boat had unbarred the floodgates and glided into a veritable ocean of light. For, as far as I could see, for miles and miles, the azure waters of the Wular spread around us, fluttering a vast expanse of mercury within the borders of the fiery sun-scorched hills.

The Nawab sought to entertain us with a song. But his voice was cracked and only his two friends sat appreciatively acclaiming his genius, while we wandered off to different points of the boat, helping with the cooking, dressing or lazily contemplating the wizardry by which nature had written a poem of broken glass, crumbling earth and blue-red fire.

For, truly, the Wular is a magnificent spectacle under the red sky at morning.

I gazed upon the placid plain of water spellbound, enchanted. I lent myself to the whispers of the rippling breeze that was awakening the sleepy lotuses: tempted by an unbearable desire to be one with it, I plunged headlong into its midst and bathed in it to my heart's desire. Then I sat, sedulously noticing the blandishments of the elements from the shadow of a canopy under which the Nawab and his friends played cut-throat bridge.

By ten o'clock we had crossed the lake to Bandipur, a dull,

insignificant little village on the road to Gilgit, the last stronghold of British Indian power before the earth ventures out into the deserts of Central Asia, uncharted except by shepherds till the Soviets brought the steel plough of prosperity there.

The Nawab here ordered the Tehsildar to bring him ten chickens, five dozen eggs and some fruit for our delectation. And he took us about to the dirty houses of the village to show us off, or rather to show himself off, to the poor inhabitants of the township.

Our boatman came running and said that we should hurry because he wanted to row us across the middle of the lake before noon, as a squall generally arose in the Wular every day at noon and it was likely to upset the boat if the vessel hadn't already crossed the danger zone before midday.

The Nawab abused him in Kashmiri, a language in which curses seem more potent than prayers.

We pressed the boatman's point, and since His Grace could not swear at us, he said he would get a man on *begar* (forced labour) to help the boatman and his family to row across the lake more quickly, and he tarried.

The boatman came again after half an hour and found us all waiting impatiently for the Nawab's return from a visit to the lavatory: His Grace had suddenly thought it fit to have a hair cut and a Turkish bath in a hamam, and he didn't care what happened to us. When he did emerge from his ablutions, and heard not only the insistent appeals of the boatman, but our urgent recommendations, he, as a mark of his favour, clemency, or whatever you may call it, forthwith stopped a young man of the village who was walking along the cobbled high street and ordered him so proceed to our boat and help to row it to Srinagar.

'But Srinagar is fifty miles away, Sir,' said the young man, 'and my mother has died. I am on the way to attend to her funeral.'

'Swine, dare you refuse?' snarled the Nawab. 'You are a liar!'

'No, Nawab Sahib,' said the man, joining his hands. 'You are like God in mercy and goodness. Please forgive me. I am footsore and weary after a twenty-mile march in the mountains where I

want to fetch my uncle's donkey. And now my mother has died and I must see the Mullah about securing a place for her burial.

'Run, run towards the boat,' bawled the Nawab, 'or I'll have you flogged by the Thanedar. Do you not know that this is the kingdom of which I am a nobleman. And you can't refuse to do *begar*.'

'But, *Sarkar* . . .' murmured the young Kashmiri, his lips trembling with the burden of a protest which could not deliver itself in the Nawab's face, which glistened not only with the aura of light that the barber's massage had produced but with the anger which the man's disobedience had called forth.

'Go to the boat, son of an ass!' shouted the Nawab and raised his hand.

At the mere suggestion of the Nawab's threat to strike, the young man began to cry, a cry which seemed childish and ridiculous in so grown-up a person, particularly because there were no tears in his large, brown, wide-awake eyes. And he moaned: 'Oh, my mother! Oh, my mother!' mechanically, in a voice which seemed to express more the cowardice of the Kashmiri which has been bred by the oppression of one brutal conqueror after another, than his very own real hurt.

But the Nawab was too thick-skinned to see the hurt in the man's soul. He looked at the big eyes weeping without tears and heard the shrill crescendo of his cry, and began to laugh.

'Let us leave him, Nawab Sahib,' we said. 'We will give the boatman a hand and row across the lake to safety if we hurry.'

'Wait, wait,' the Nawab said, as he caught hold of the man by his left ear and, laughing, dragged him towards the boat.

The *begari*, who had begun to cry at the mere suggestion of a threat, howled the heavens down at the actual impact of the Nawab's hand on his body, while the Nawab, who had only laughed derisively at first, now chuckled with a hoarse laughter which flushed his cheeks.

The man extricated his ear from the Nawab's grasp as we were about five yards from the boat, and, perhaps because he thought he

had annoyed His Grace by so overt an act of disobedience, he knelt down at his feet and, still weeping and moaning, joined his hands and began to draw lines on the earth with his nose as a sort of penance for his sin.

At this the Nawab burst into redoubled laughter, so that his face, his body itself, seemed to swell to gigantic proportions and tower above us all.

'Look!' he said, flourishing his hands histrionically without interrupting his laughter.

But the situation which had been tense enough before had become very awkward now as the man grovelled in the dust and rolled about, weeping, wailing, whining and moaning and sobbing hysterically with the most abject humility.

'Don't you weep, don't you moan, fool!' said the Nawab, screwing his eyes which were full of the tears of laughter, and he turned to the boatman, saying: 'Lift the clown from there and put him on the boat.'

The boatman obeyed the commands of the Nawab, and His Grace having stepped up to the deck behind the *begari*, we solemnly boarded the vessel.

The *begari* had now presumably half decided to do the work, as, crying his hollow cry and moaning his weird moan, he spat on his hands and took up the oar.

The Nawab, who cast the shadow of his menacing presence on the man, was more amused than ever, and he laughed hysterically, writhing and rumbling so that his two friends caught him in their grasp and laid him to rest under the canopy. He sought to shake them off with the weight of his belly and with the wild flourishing of his hands and the reverberating groans of his speech which came from his round red cheeks, muffled with continuous laughter.

The boat began to move, and as the heart-shaped oars tore the water aside, the *begari* ceased to cry and grieve with the same suddenness with which he had begun.

'Look!' the Nawab bellowed, his hysterical laughing fit ending in a jerky cough which convulsed him as a spark of lightning shakes

a cloud with thunder. 'Look!' he spluttered and pointed towards the *begari*.

But the balls of his eyes rolled suddenly; his face flushed ghastly red and livid; his throat, twisting like a hemp rope, gave vent to gasping, whistling noises, and his hand fell limp by his side.

We all rushed towards him.

One of his friends had put his hand on the Nawab's heart, another was stroking his back.

A soft gurgle reverberated from the Nawab's mouth. Then there was the echo of a groan and he fell dead. He had been choked by his fit of laughter.

The boat rolled on across the still waters of the Wullar the way it had come, and we sat in the terrible darkness of our minds, utterly silent, till the *begari* began to cry and moan again:

'Oh, my mother! Oh, my mother!'

The Informer

THERE were seven of us, or rather six, because the seventh behaved merely as a cipher, or follower, doing what we did, saying what we said. If, for instance, we had an all-night session to discuss ways and means of contacting our friends in different parts of the country, he would never make an original suggestion but sit up all night, even though he had to be fighting sleep in order to keep awake; and if any of us said anything, whether silly or profound, he would repeat the last part of the sentence exactly, to signify agreement, somewhat in this way:

'Anxiety is like a tangled undergrowth of fear,' I said.

'Anxiety is like a tangled undergrowth of fear,' he repeated in a falling, bored voice.

'Every one of us should show what a man can be,' our secretary said.

'Yes, every one of us should show what a man can be,' he said.

And yet he was no mere yes-man, because somewhere in him, amid the large silences of lethargy, he seemed to be retreating his steps to the narrow lanes where he had been born and among which he brooded, as though he were sitting among the ruins of his heritage and as though he heard the rumble of his father's voice admonishing him for some default, while his mother was consoling him with affectionate words and the proverbial sweets. . . .

He was singularly handsome to look at, with a tallish frame which made up for his lack of grace, his narrow chest, the rounded shoulders and the shuffling gait: his face was a dark brown moon visage with a small forehead, a shapely nose, full lips and a pair of enormous brown eyes which, though rather furtive and withdrawn, as though he were hiding them, were mellow with gentleness.

Altogether, the effect of his personality was that of an individual weighed down by some unknown fear or obsession into the dull reiteration of the ox mind, whose viciousness lay rather in the unconscious malice of stupidity than in any deliberate intent to hurt anyone.

"For viciousness indeed it was on his part to tell the police everything about us when the house we lived in at Lahore was raided, and where we were charged with 'conspiring to deprive His Majesty the King Emperor of his Suzerainty in India, and for plotting the overthrow of the Government as constituted by law, etc.' Thus, the person whom we did not count at all, whom we regarded as a mere nothing because of his abject and unintelligent echoing of every phrase of ours, became the important person, the key to our destiny.

It was a ghastly experience:

For the police arrived at dawn and stunned us by their presence on the top of the house we inhabited in Kutchery Road: we had not been expecting such a sudden visitation, as we had been fairly

careful about our movements and had left no traces of the literature we were distributing. A little rubbing of the eyes, however, a somnolent stretch or two, accompanied by sighs of regret for the beautiful sleep in the nimble breeze of the cool early morning of which we had been deprived, and we surrendered ourselves without a fuss, though after we had demanded that the warrants for our arrest be produced and expressed our intention to plead 'not guilty' when charged. But Gopal, the seventh member of our cadre, seemed not so much stunned as ready to break, to lose his head altogether. From being the indifferent, ineffectual, lackadaisical person that he had always seemed, he became quite impassioned and hysterical.

He jumped off his bed and, with a curious jolt, began to somersault across the length of the roof in a series of unending movements, frothing at the mouth, weeping large tears from his large eyes and hissing like a serpent, even as he shook his head as if to cast off the deadening weight of thoughts which had hung his head down for years. After he had slipped from the grasp of the policemen three or four times and he was finally brought to his bed, and we were all trying to pacify him with kind words, remonstrances and anger, he jumped off again, somersaulted and sat in the middle of the roof, beating his head, grinding his teeth and frothing profusely, shaking his head up and down. Then, throwing himself back, he fell with a thud and lay in a morose silence. We all wondered if it was epilepsy or whether he was shaking off the troubles of a million years of pain.

But as the police forcibly lifted him with a roughness, aroused by, what they called, his obstinacy, he began to blurt out confessional statements, emotional vapourings and pleas for mercy, and accusations against us which might be useful to the police.

'You planned it fine,' he said, 'with no thought to the consequences of your designs, with never a thought that we should be hanged on the gallows by the Sarkar! Freedom and Liberty, you said! But you did not even suspect that the people of whom you talked are crude, peasant boors, incapable of appreciating—'

'Shut up and don't be such a petit-bourgeois fool!' Hans said.

'You thought you were all being very clever in evading the law and I was a fool to fall in with you!' he ejaculated. 'I will spill the beans now, you scheming old devils. You didn't even have the courage to call for blood; you were little bureaucrats waiting for the judgment-day! . . .'

'You are mad,' was all we said, and let him 'spill the beans.'

During our trial we thought he would turn approver and get off lightly. But curiously, apart from the crazy snatches of defiant abuse he hurled against us, punctuated with gentle smiles, whimpering and hurricanes of uncontrolled temper, he merely repeated the evidence we gave in his familiar manner of our old confederate days.

We were all given ten years' penal servitude each, a sentence accompanied by a statement from the judge that though there was no evidence to show that we had committed any violence, we had been suspiciously underground for a year and had tried to organize Labour for purposes which might have been detrimental to the peace of the realm.

Needless to say, the severity of this sentence came as a shock to us, but all we could do was to accept it and hope that our friends would file an appeal on our behalf.

Gopal did not break down as he had done at the time of our joint arrest. In fact, he remained particularly calm. But, as we were embracing each other, because we thought we might not meet again for many years if we were sent to different gaols in the country to serve our respective sentences, he came over to us and flung himself on the ground before us, and made obeisance with joined hands. Then he touched the dust at our feet with his hands, smeared it on his forehead, joined his hands again and in the most tender, supplicating voice said:

'Forgive me, please, forgive me, brothers.'

We lifted him hastily and told him there was nothing to forgive.

'There is nothing to forgive.' He repeated the tail-end of our exhortation as was his wont to do.

We were amazed by that repetition and cordially embraced him, one by one.

He seemed to be overcome by the warmth of our greeting for a moment and lapsed into the silent shadows of his heart as in the old days. Then he came to suddenly and said:

'Your hatred and my love have joined together to-day and we should soon be on our own way to the beyond. Will you promise me that if any of you survive you will raise a fund to build a monument to my memory—a simple black stone image of Mother India, on which I want engraved the words of our National Song: *Bande Mataram*.'

And at that he himself called aloud: '*Bande Mataram*.'

For once we could not help repeating his words and shouted the slogan. But after all the evidence he had given about our work, which the police had made much of, none of us promised in our hearts to build that monument with which he desired us to enshrine his glory.

Lottery

(To Stefan)

THERE are certain words which so nearly approximate to the basic emotions of the human heart that though they may belong to one language they easily become current in all the others. Lottery is one of those universal words, and its general acceptability is due largely to the bit of the gambler that there is in every human being, to the belief in luck, fate, or accident of chance, of most people in a universe where little is certain. That one person, from among the millions who buy a ticket or a voucher, should receive a sudden windfall from the money contributed by these millions—that is what most human beings desire in this world of grandiose palaces and empty barns.

There was nothing surprising, therefore, in the fact that Kanahiya, the illiterate hillman from Kangra, who was watchman of the Imperial Bank of India, used the word lottery with almost the same frequency as he smoked a cigarette or puffed at his coco-nut basined hookah. In fact, this was only to be expected, because, having retired from the army with nothing more than the bluff of the exaggerated prestige of sepoyhood, and a pension of three rupees a month, and seeing large sums of money change hands on the counters, or lying in the vaults of the bank, where he had secured a job following demobilization after the last war, he was, in one way or another, constantly aware of money. Full of admiration for the rich cloth and grain merchants who came to deposit their cotton bags of rupees at the bank every day, saluting the sahibs who drove up in big limousines to negotiate deals, their pockets bulging with paper notes, he had independently evolved the prayer: 'Make me rich, make me rich quick, O God, make me rich,' which he hummed in certain secret moments.

The prayer was, of course, never answered, for, as every one knows, money does not fall like manna from heaven; there is not even a cash system in the celestial sphere, only barter.

So after many vain attempts at getting rich quick, by repeating his prayer, Kanahiya suddenly remembered one day that in the holy books which the village priest used to recite every morning there was something to the effect that only those who work or do something to realize the ideal they seek in prayer find their requests to God answered.

Now, he could not become rich quickly by doing very much in the way of business, because he had no capital. And he could not become rich by getting a more lucrative job, because jobs had been as scarce during the past years as phoenixes—which are supposed to elevate one to kingship if they ever pass over one's head. So, tied to his post, on his unmilitary sentry go at the gates of the bank, his double-barrelled gun in his hand, he had sought to find a way to do something to get rich quick.

At last he had ventured very timidly to ask a manager who was

going home on leave how white men came to be so rich. The sahib, giving the watchman a little bakhshish, had laughed and casually said, 'Kismet,' mere luck. On being pressed further by the persistent Kanahiya about the secrets of white men's success, and how he could emulate the example of the Westerners, the Englishman had jocularly said: 'Try a lottery.'

At first Kanahiya had not been able to understand what the manager sahib meant. But then he had asked Babu Radha Krishan, head clerk of the bank. The Babu had explained to him that there was a lottery called the Calcutta Sweep, for which one bought a share in a ticket at the modest price of ten to twenty rupees, and this might bring one a lakh of rupees if the number of one's ticket coincided with the number of the horse in the race run in Vilayat.

Ever since then the word 'lottery' had become a kind of mono-syllabic prayer, a watchword, catchword, *cliché*, phrase, proverb or whatever you would like to call it, on Kanahiya's tongue. He mumbled it to himself in secret moments when no one was looking, specially at bed-time or in the early morning, and he would talk about it to his friends on the least little excuse.

'You know,' he would say to Badri, the coachman of Lalla Banarsi Das, who came on a buggy to the bank, 'there is a magical lottery run in Vilayat by which, if you buy a ticket, or a share in a ticket, you can become a lakh-pati overnight if you are lucky to have the horse of your number come first in a race.'

'Aye, to be sure,' said Badri dubiously, 'but if it was as easy to become lakh-patis by this lottery you speak about then our Lallas would sit at home with their wives rather than sweat in their shops in the cloth market.'

But as his friends were cynical, Kanahiya would talk about lottery to strangers, mostly because he was talking aloud to himself to confirm his own faith in this extraordinary way of making money. Like his friends, however, the strangers dismissed all his talk about the lottery as the vapourings of a gullible fool. And if he invoked the fact that the manager sahib himself had told him to

try a lottery, they said that the sahib had been merely pulling his leg. Babu Radha Krishan's confirmation of the sahib's suggestion, and the details about the Calcutta Sweep lottery which the clerk had given him, seemed to his hearers the complicated talk of a half-baked learned man who was a danger to learning as well as to life.

The dream to get rich quick goaded Kanahiya on, however, in spite of every one, especially after he had consulted Babu Radha Krishan again and again about the exact details of the Calcutta Sweep lottery. And to clinch matters, Babu Radha Krishan offered his services as an intermediary to buy him a share in a ticket for twenty rupees.

Kanahiya had been saving up two rupees a month for years and had piled up two hundred or so rupees in the bank in this way. Further, he had himself turned banker to the poor washermen, sweepers and cobblers who lived in the stables of the gentry in Queen's Road, Amritsar, where he himself occupied a room in an outhouse of Babu Radha Krishan's bungalow. He had earned a fair bit of interest on the money he lent out, so that his total fortune was something like three hundred rupees. 'You can well afford to risk twenty rupees on this lottery,' Babu Radha Krishan said to him, 'rather than go on talking about it and asking questions all the time. I know you have lots of money buried somewhere under the earth in several pitchers.'

The miser in Kanahiya made him hesitate, but the gambler in him egged him on, so the Babu settled the matter for him by actually making him buy a share for ten rupees in a ticket for the Calcutta Sweep in which he himself had bought a share.

During the period when the great race was to be run, somewhere in Vilayat, and the result of the stakes was to be declared, Kanahiya's obsession with lottery became a positive mania. He would pester Babu Radha Krishan for news of the result every day; he would stop all the big Lallas to ask them if they knew anything about the Calcutta Sweep; and he even dared to go up to the new manager sahib, the forbidding little Mister Strong with the bald head and

the ginger eyebrows, and asked him about the race. As this sahib, who was not given to levity, said that the result would be out soon and that he himself had bought a ticket in the sweep, Kanahiya calmed down a little and waited with characteristic Oriental patience. His faith in the myth of lottery became so solid, indeed, that when he talked about it now to his friends he did so casually, as though it were an institution as solid as the Imperial Bank of India, only varying from this established firm in that it brought a million-fold interest on one's investment rather than the interest of three per cent.

At last Babu Radha Krishan called on him at his hovel in the out-house one day with a newspaper in his hand and said that the result of the lottery had been declared and published and that, unfortunately, neither he nor Kanahiya had won anything; but that a peasant, a mere yokel in America, had got the lakh of rupees for the first prize and that two English lords had won the second and third prizes.

The bottom seemed to fall out of Kanahiya's world. He seemed to go pale and almost collapsed with disappointment, so that Babu Radha Krishan had to fetch smelling-salts to revive him. Fortunately for Kanahiya it was a Sunday and he did not have to go to work, and he slept the clock round after he had swallowed some medicine which the Babu gave him.

For a few days afterwards he kept himself to himself and tried to avoid every one he knew, both at the bank and among the colony of menials in the stables and outhouses of Queen's Road. His only consolation was that he had not been talking about the lottery overmuch for the last few days, because he had been too worried and expectant about the result. And now he hoped that people had forgotten his pet interest and would not ask him what news he had of the lottery and whether he had become a lakh pati. As the strain of earning a living kept most of his own circle of friends busy, and none of them could read a paper, none of them asked him any awkward questions. Only the manager sahib jocularly remarked: 'A good salary for honest work is better than speculation, eh,

Kanahiya. Specially for poor people like you and I!' Luckily no one else was listening when the sahib said this; and anyhow, if someone had been there, Kanahiya was assured that they wouldn't have known what the talk was about, since the manager had not mentioned the word lottery.

In fact, Kanahiya so hated this word now that he could not even bear to think of it. All he was concerned about was to somehow make good those ten rupees which he had gambled and to try to save a little more money by pulling in his expenses. He forthwith raised the rate of interest he charged on the loans he gave by an anna in the rupee and became the careful watchman he had been before the mania for this lottery had taken possession of him.

But though he made good his losses on the gamble during the next year and was fairly content, the dream of getting rich quick often assailed him at nights. He would see himself as the landlord of his village, strutting about like a peacock in his fields full of corn, or as a rich Lalla, splendidly clad, promenading in the Kangra valley, eating mangoes and bathing in the river, before going home to a handsome bejewelled wife. He did not take much notice of these nightly aberrations of his soul, but he did feel afraid that never now would he be able to return to his village as a rich man and marry the daughter of Subedar Raghunath Singh, as he could have done if he had become a lakh-pati.

Hardened, careful and cynical, he resisted all temptations, however, and tried the safe and sure path of success through saving pice rather than risking an anna to make a rupee. And he evolved a corresponding philosophy to help him to live this modest life: 'A Rajah is a Rajah,' he would say, 'a watchman is a watchman, and a washerman is a washerman. So men were born, each in his place. No one should look at another's buttered bread and cultivate envy or greed.' All I want is a bed to lie on, food to eat and work to do to keep myself from thinking too much....'

'And a wife to sleep with,' put in Shankar the washerman.

'No, no, I have no use for women,' Kanahiya said. But when he

went to bed that night he felt that there was some truth in what Shankar had said. 'No home is complete without a woman,' he said to himself. 'And, to confess the truth, I have always envied Shankar his wife, Sobha, almost as fair as the Mem Sahib of Mr. Strong, and with a bottom which winks at one with every step she takes.'

She was the kind of woman he wanted; in fact there was no other woman like her, and it was her he wanted, he said in his mind. But how was he to get her? Another man's wife? It seemed impossible! . . .

Only, as he contemplated the smiling, happy young form of Sobha in his mind, he realized how often he had looked at her with desire. And if, as the holy men said, to look at a woman with desire was tantamount to having had her, then he had already possessed Sobha in a kind of way. So that even if he eloped with her, there would be no question of sin in it; he would be only claiming a woman who was his by all the rights of love. And how could he run away with her? How could he get another job to survive? And what would people think? He was afraid. He must forget all about this and go to sleep.

Kanahiya tried hard to go to sleep that night, but the agitation which possessed him mounted higher and higher in his brain, while he tossed from side to side on his bed and cried: 'God give me sleep!' After the wrestling of various colloquies in his mind, as he was going over the incidents in his life, he recalled the disillusioning business of the lottery. A sudden illumination possessed him: he would not himself risk any more gambles of that sort, but he would persuade Shankar to borrow ten rupees from him on the mortgage of his wife Sobha, and as the washerman was unlikely, as he himself had been, to become a lakhs-pati, he would keep Sobha; for Shankar was already heavily in debt to him and would never be able to pay off the mortgage with interest and get his wife back. That plan settled in his mind, Kanahiya slept the sleep of peace during the rest of the night.

When he woke up in the morning he exposed the plot to the

rays of the sun above his head, and, lo and behold, Surya could not outstare him or make him feel ashamed. He tested the plan under the cold shower of the copious water that flowed from the lion-mouthing pump by Gagar Mal's serai, and the design in his mind emerged crystal-clear and pure after the bath. He contemplated the world of men and women about him at the end of Queen's Road and no one seemed to point the finger of accusation against him.

On the way to the bank, therefore, he called on Shankar and said:

'Why, Ohe Shankar, what about paying me some of the money you owe me. The interest alone has piled up to ten rupees.'

Shankar stood silently by the donkey on whom he was loading bundles of clothes to go and wash at the ghat; he did not know what to say. To be sure, he had borrowed twenty rupees almost five years ago to celebrate the wedding of his younger brother, but he had not been able to save a pice in these hard times to pay back the capital or the interest on it. What could he say? At last he spoke:

'Ache, bhai, it is early morning and I am going to the ghat, while Sobha is baking bread to take with us. I shall give you an answer to-night and see if I can find a little ornament to sell or pawn to pay off the interest.'

'This is no talk,' said Kanahiya, putting the heat on, 'I want some of that money.'

'But, brother, it is early morning, and we have hardly awakened yet.'

'Son of the donkey, you are making excuses!' shouted Kanahiya. 'I am a watchman, once a sepoy, and I know how to wake you up properly.' And he flourished his musket at the washerman.

'That would only put me to sleep,' Shankar laughed.

'Oh, illegally begotten, I mean business,' Kanahiya threatened.

'Acha then, let us discuss business,' said Shankar, holding the donkey's ear in one hand and offering Kanahiya a seat on the string bed with the other.

'Unless you pay me the whole of the money which you owe me, by to-night, I will take you to the court,' said Kanahiya peremptorily.

'He drinks most of his wages away,' said Sobha from the kitchen. 'Now this will teach him a lesson. He should have saved. He didn't even buy me a skirt.'

'Shut up, prostitute!' Shankar said. 'Don't you interfere in men's business.'

'She is right,' said Kanahiya.

'Yes, watchman Kanahiya Sahib, he rows with me when he gets drunk, and even beats me,' Sobha said.

The washerman sank on to the string bed and sat down silent and defeated.

'Answer me!' Kanahiya bawled.

'What can I say?' said Shankar, after a long pause.

'Well, then, I can suggest a solution to you. I will give you ten more rupees—'

'Oh, generous watchman, sahib, he will only drink it,' said Sobha.

'No, he won't do that,' said Kanahiya masterfully. 'I will give him ten more rupees if he mortgages you, Sobha, to me. With ten rupees he can buy a share in a ticket for the lottery and, if he is lucky, he may become a lakh-pati and claim you back, as well as pay his dues to me. If not, he forfeits you.... Those are my final terms.'

'But Maharaj!' cried Sobha.

'Oh, Kanahiya Seth! You never won that lottery, what chance have I?' said Shankar, his hands joined in supplication.

'I tell you, those are my final terms,' said Kanahiya. 'Think them over during the day; in the evening I must have a settlement. Try your luck; you may be luckier than I.'

And, saying this, he stalked away towards the bank.

All day Kanahiya was in a flutter as he contemplated the rounded contours of Sobha's body in his mind, as he thought of her firm breasts and her fair face. She had sided with him clearly, he felt, in the quarrel with Shankar, that she seemed more than willing to be

mortgaged to him in spite of her last show of protest. Besides, he could give her a cake of Pears' soap and some electro-plated trinkets and win her love. That word lottery, he gratefully thought. Surely there is a magic in it. Only he hoped that Shankar would not be able to raise the money to pay him off during the day. Anyhow, he had some documents prepared by the Munshi of the bank to secure his plans to get Sobha.

After the bank closed he hurried to the washerman's house and, flourishing the musket of his gun in his right hand, demanded, in a hissing whisper:

'Why, ohe Shankar, what have you decided?'

The washerman stood silently ironing clothes in the dark room which was both laundry and home to him and Sobha.

'Speak!' blared forth Kanahiya.

Shankar stopped ironing, but could not even lift his head to face the moneylender.

'Don't you see that I have made you a fair offer? You may be lucky and the ten rupees lottery share I have bought you may rid you of all financial difficulties.'

But in the boundless misery of Shankar's heart there was no room even for a particle of faith or even a ray of hope. He just sank down on his knees and, with tears in his eyes, begged Kanahiya for a little more grace.

'The seed of a donkey!' Kanahiya roared in a stentorian voice. 'Be a man and take the chance I am offering you!'

'You, asking him to be a man,' Sobha put in. 'You, a sneaking worm who has designed this plot to ensnare me. Go, you are less than a worm, you are a puffed up ox from the hills with your fictions of lottery. Have you become a lakh-pati that you demand me from the man to whom I am married?'

'Sobha!' exclaimed the amazed Kanahiya, the pallor of chagrin on his face. 'But I thought you said you had no use for this drunkard anyhow!'

'Get out of here!' the washerwoman said regally.

'You bitch of all the dogs in the washerwoman's brotherhood!'

shouted Kanahiya, lifting his double-barrelled gun. 'Silent, or I will murder you!' And for a moment he simulated the manner of the dacoits in the films made by Malabar Talkies. Turning theatrically to Shankar, he said: 'Here is the ten-rupee share in that lottery ticket I have bought you. . . . And you, Sobha, come, I will make a woman of you!' And he went towards her.

'I will make you into a man if you don't look out and dare to touch me!' Sobha said.

'Come, don't be difficult,' said Kanahiya, wakening to her in the crisis which meant love or despair for him.

Sobha slapped him on the face with a sharp, clear stroke, while Shankar trembled.

The hillman's blood rose to boiling-point at the insult and he lifted Sobha clear from the waist and carried her out, leaving the wailing Shankar behind. The outhouse in which the washerman lived was hidden from public view and no one heard the shrieks of Sobha nor the moans of her husband.

Locking her up in his own room, without bread or water, Kanahiya sat down on a charpai outside, smoking the bubble-bubble even as he trembled to think of the future. He was afraid that Shankar might call the police, or that the neighbours might tell on him and that the whole of his high-handed behaviour might cost him dearly in the end. But he had taken the precaution of forging a paper, transfixing the thumb-mark signature of Shankar from a previous deed to a new deal in which the washerman had promised to hand over his wife as a mortgage for arrears of debt and a ten-rupee share of the lottery. Sobha had been too outspoken to every one in the neighbourhood to evoke any sympathy, and Shankar, being weak, Kanahiya hoped for the best.

Sobha banged at the door and cried 'Dohai' for a long time, until exhausted, she fell asleep.

Kanahiya went in and, placing some sweets by her, locked the room and slept outside.

When Sobha woke up at dawn and found that he had not touched

her, but had instead left sweets by her bed, she, who had been a drudge in Shankar's house, weakened towards Kanahiya to some extent. And when he proposed that he would give up his job and elope to the hills with her she did not protest too loudly.

Before anyone was up in the outhouses, and while Shankar had gone to the cantonment to fetch his uncle, who was employed in a regiment and could get a colonel's letter to enforce his demand for the return of his wife from a mere civilian, Kanahiya bundled Sobha into a yekka with a few belongings and caught the dawn train from Amritsar Junction to Pathankot.

Having plied Sobha with all the gifts that he could buy at Pathankot, Kanahiya headed for a village where he knew a friendly sepoy, and there he remained in hiding for a month or two. Sobha yielded to him after a few more sanguinary battles, for cream cakes would soften any poor woman's heart, and hot milk with jelebies accelerates the process of conquest. Kanahiya had had a letter of resignation written by a Munshi at Pathankot, and rested and enjoyed himself to his heart's content.

Then, sober, careful man that he was, he thought of ending his holiday and putting his affairs in order. He had about three hundred rupees in cash and a hundred and fifty owing to him from various clients in Amritsar, apart from the money Shankar owed him, of which he had generously thought of making a free gift to the husband in token of his mistress. With five hundred he was told he could buy a new house and a plot of land sufficient to grow two crops a year. But how was he to get his money back from the clients: he would have to go back to Amritsar once again.

He pondered long over the pros and cons of so hazardous a venture. At last, his gun in hand, and his gambler's instinct emergent again, he decided to risk it.

So off he took Sobha to Pathankot by yekka, decked in the best hillwoman's finery, and boarded the night train to Amritsar.

Arriving late next morning, he took a tonga and headed straight for Queen's Road. But the tonga-driver found it difficult to negotiate his vehicle into the path which led to the outhouses of the

washermen and sweepers, for a vast concourse of menials was gathered together there, drinking and laughing and singing, dressed in the gayest clothes.

Was it the Holi Festival when the washermen were prone to get very excited, or was someone being married, he wondered.

At last he asked the tonga-driver to ask someone what all the jollity was about.

‘Why, don’t you know?’ said the tonga-driver; ‘the whole town knows that the washerman, Shankar, has won the share of ten thousand rupees in the lottery. His ticket came third. I thought you were his guests coming here for the celebrations.’

Kanahiya’s face fell. He clutched at his heart and nearly fainted.

‘Stop!’ he ordered the tonga-driver. ‘Wait a while.’

And then he turned towards Sobha.

‘You can wait or do what you like,’ she said, jumping off the tonga. ‘I am going back home.’

And before Kanahiya knew where he was, she was running towards the outhouse which was her home. The bird had flown out of his grasp, and, what was more, he could not now, since Shankar had become a rich and influential man, stay in the neighbourhood lest the washerman put the law on him.

‘It’s all a lottery—life,’ said the tonga-driver sympathetically. ‘Do you want to get down or do you want to go back? She has gone. If I were you I should cut my losses and depart in peace.’

The tonga-driver had echoed his inmost thoughts. He had played high stakes and lost; he had played low stakes and the consequences were the same. Life was, indeed, a lottery nowadays. He sighed and said:

‘Brother, I’ll go back to the station and catch the twelve o’clock train.’

The beat of the dholki in the outhouse of Shankar and Sobha fell like the strokes of final doom on his heart and he held his head in his hands.

‘Come on, be a man,’ said the tonga-driver as he looked round after lashing his horse into a canter . . .

Mahadev and Parvati

(To Dr. H. K. Handoo)

WHERE the milk-white Ganga meets the dusky Jamuna are a few islets and sandy beaches on which the Kumbh Fair is held every twelve years. It is one of the most spectacular and enormous congregations in India, attracting to it the devout and the undevout, from every corner of the land, full of the loftiest aspirations, fears and hopes, hungry for the food of the gods, thirsty for the waters of immortality. Preparations for the fair go on months ahead. The Sadhus and ascetics have Narsinghas of copper made to blow their greetings across the Himalayas to Lord Siva from whose mouth the River Ganga is supposed to flow. The Brahmin priests rub up the mnemonic verses from the ancient holy books and evolve a more mysterious and magical ritual than that of previous years, for worship with them is like jugglery, the better the trick the bigger the price earned on it. And the people put by more and more money from their earnings to offer it to the holy men and the priests in order to secure easy passports to heaven.

Though the city of Prayag, where the confluence of the Ganga and Jamuna takes place, is a far cry from Colombo in Ceylon, in the mind of Parvati, the wife of the engineer Mahadev, it had assumed a significance more subtle than that which she could associate with the nearer shrine of Rameshwaram on the Cape Comorin, or even with the historic temple of Madura near Madras. She had found her grasp on the imagination of her husband slipping for some time, and she thought that a pilgrimage to Prayag, where the breath of the male Siva weds the fiery dark Kali, might in some way cast a spell on him. Mahadev himself would rather have gone to the temple of Konark at Jagan-nath-Puri, for a change of air and to see some of those famous erotic sculptures which are supposed to stir even the most jaded appetites to new fiercenesses

of sexual fury. But the power of an Indian woman's persuasive tongue is only second to that of an American.

So off they went to a suburban railway station by Colombo and boarded a train for the north. Originally Tamils from Coconada, they sighed with nostalgia at the first glimpse of India from the small ship which crosses the short channel from Ceylon to the mainland.

And Mahadev would still much rather have gone to Ooty to drink a little beer in the cafés of the hill station and, if possible, to pick up some Englishwoman like those with whom he had had great success as a student in London. Instead, however, he had to stick to the route planned by Parvati, which led along the straight and narrow tracks of the Madras railway. They had two trunks in a second class carriage all to themselves till Nagpur, but after that the throng of pilgrims began to increase and they had to squeeze into a corner, sit sweating, soot-covered and heavily-lidded with sleep. By the time they were a few hours' journey from Prayag there was no room in the carriage to throw a til seed. What will not men and women endure to hang on to each other!

At last they reached Allahabad Junction on a torrid morning. Mahadev suggested that, in view of the congestion, it was best to stay at the Parsi hotel in the civil lines, and to motor over to Prayag a few miles away. Parvati conceded this as she had been pushed about enough by others more grasping after each other, and heaven, than her.

It was with great difficulty that they secured accommodation in Messrs. Dinshaw's English-style guest-house, for other professional men, too, from all parts of India seemed to have been led by their devoted wives, or the pull of their inherited faith, to the Kumbh Fair. And the atmosphere of the ramshackle hotel, with its tawdry Victorian furniture and pictures of Edward VII, seemed to the mind of the engineer Mahadev, from the slightly more advanced Ceylon, to be alien and inhospitable.

Parvati, who had been born in the house of a rich Tamil merchant in Malaya, and been married to Mahadev because he had found the dowry of two lakhs of rupees accompanying her a sufficient

compensation for her lack of physical charm, was more compromising and docile. For she felt she was nearing the moment when she would realize that union with her husband through the influence of the vision of the two rivers meeting which she had built up like a myth in her mind.

Mahadev was feeling sleepy, but he had to look for a taxi if they were ever to get to Prayag to have a dip in the waters of the Sangham before the sun rose too high; and, of course, taxis were non-existent on this auspicious day, having been requisitioned by the grandees and princes, who can always buy their way to heaven. The couple stood on the roadside and waited for a horse-driven yekka. But these were chock full of people from the civil lines on the way to Prayag, and the pilgrims from Ceylon waited in vain. At length someone advised them to trudge it by a short cut. They took the advice and set off.

The rising heat of the morning, the dust of the road and the worry of it, all made Mahadev miserable as, like a good Hindu husband, he walked four yards ahead of Parvati, a polo topee on his head, a white linen suit covering his sweating, heavy-limbed body, his feet thumping at an angle of forty-five degrees.

Their steady patience was, however, soon rewarded, because a yekka driver picked them up on to his overloaded carriage, even though it was for the exorbitant sum of five rupees a fare for less than five miles.

Soon they were in sight of the River Ganga. And, already, feeling the impact of the cool breeze which rises from its snow-fed waters, Parvati felt her soul bursting with hope like a lotus. Even Mahadev was excited by the sight of the congregation on the river banks, scattered like shining white blossoms among the groves.

Every instant the din of the fair grew louder. And before long they had alighted and were part of the throng. Mahadev did not know if it was the contagion of togetherness which inspired him, but he dragged Parvati forward with great gusto through the crowd, shouting encouragement to her so as to be heard above the babble of men and women praying, talking, above the per-

sistent calls of the hawkers, the obstreperous wailing of the beggars, the ear-splitting whistles of the toy-sellers.

As they penetrated farther, however, the thrill of community seemed to become suffocating, and Mahadev felt as if he would never get out of the clutches of the swarms of beggars—the blind, the deaf, the dumb, the leprous cripples minus an arm or a leg—all clutching for money and droning like wasps.

“Come this way to the river, sahib,” said a white-robed man, the imprint of sandalwood paste on his forehead clearly showing that he was a priest.

Mahadev felt relieved. And soon he and his wife were out of the claustrophobic atmosphere, seated on a platform by their rescuer, who seemed to be the partner of a hefty Brahmin who presided over the ritual of the dip in the confluence of Ganga and Jamuna.

Mahadev, who had travelled a lot and had endless experience of European guides, might have guessed that a tout is a tout, on the banks of the Ganga as well as on the quay at Marseilles, but for the fact that hardly had he and his wife sat down than the head priest took them completely in his charge and began to weave a fantastic web of mumbo-jumbo verses around the couple’s heads, breaking the sacred word into their ears, touching their noses, their chins, and sprinkling the ash of thup on their bodies.

The couple did not speak Hindustani and the priests did not know Tamil or English, except for the tout who spoke a few words of broken Angrezi, but the language of gesture always becomes very potent in such circumstances.

After a lot of spell-binding, the tout tied the end of the loin-cloth Mahadev had assumed with the dhoti of Parvati, having, it seemed, understood the peculiar reason for the couple’s pilgrimage. And he led them to the river.

Amid the chants of the holy men, devout worshippers of the Sun, and the hissing prayers of the other men and women themselves, Mahadev and Parvati soaked themselves thoroughly in the water on the spot where the Ganga and Jamuna become one,

and dripping, emerged, the ends of their wet clothes still tied together.

The tout led them back to the platform, where the high priest greeted them with more hymns and verses, even as he scattered rice over their heads and made them smell the smoke of sandalwood.

Mahadev and Parvati were by now on the way to being hypnotized into the feeling of togetherness, which they had come here to realize. And, beaming with warm smiles, they stood with joined hands before the agent of God, waiting for the union of their two minds which they felt sure was approaching steadily as the ceremonial became more and more intricate. Parvati was praying in Tamil that she hoped that as Ganga is united with Jamuna, her lord and master would remain united with her and that they would return here together in twenty years.

Suddenly, however, the high priest made a sign as if he was testing a silver rupee on the thumb and forefinger of his right hand.

Through his bleary, half-asleep eyes Mahadev saw it, but did not take any notice.

The high priest repeated the sign and lifted the ten fingers of his hands and said: 'Hazaar!'

Mahadev was used to being addressed as Hazaar and stood with his head upright like a lord of the earth.

At this the tout ducked his head forward before Mahadev's gaze and said, in broken English: 'Rupee one thousand!' And thrusting his palm forward said: 'Give.'

Mahadev opened his eyes wide with astonishment and incomprehension.

'One thousand, charge for ceremony! Understand? Give now!' The tout's words were like hammer blows.

Mahadev swept his wife's face with a sharp glance and then, blinking his eyes, he waved his head, saying: 'No.'

'Put money here,' the tout said, rapping his knuckles on the platform.

Parvati nudged her husband to goad him to render forth unto

God the price of His acceptance of her prayer, though she had no idea how much God was demanding.

In order not to give her the impression that he was being mingy or mean over the offerings, Mahadev joined his hands meekly to both the priest's and said, 'Fifty rupees.'

'How much does he say?' the old priest asked the tout.

The tout told him in Hindustani. Whereupon the high priest poured out a flood of Sanskrit imprecations asking the Gods to come and witness the impudence of the couple. And the tout shouted at Mahadev in a mixture of English, Hindustani and Punjabi, a great deal about how these dirty, beef-eating southerners come and want to expiate their sins by offering a few pieces to the servants of God....

'One hundred rupees!' Mahadev offered generously to avoid the fuss.

The tout caught hold of the knot on the dhotis of the couple and began to sever it.

Parvati turned and saw the symbol of her togetherness with her husband in danger of being destroyed. She began to weep, and caught hold of Mahadev's arm with tender, supplicating hands.

Mahadev patted her on the head even as he addressed the tout in English and appealed to him to be a gentleman.

'Give a thousand rupees at once! Or I will break your head!' the tout answered. And he flashed his red eyeballs menacingly at the engineer.

The high priest added his quota of bullying and remonstrance.

A crowd began to gather together, muttering all kinds of malicious and unfriendly sentiments about southerners.

Mahadev felt the same claustrophobia now as he had experienced on his arrival at the fair. With a pitiful sob he put his head on his joined hands and knelt before the high priest, begging to be excused and offering two hundred rupees.

The high priest dismissed his abject apology with the most perfunctory of godly gestures.

And the tout, feeling that he had broken the pilgrim's will, struck Mahadev on the head, saying: 'Get up. You won't escape this way. A thousand rupees and no less!'

'Oh, don't be so cruel,' said a kindly pilgrim, coming to Mahadev's help. 'He is a stranger in these parts.'

'Go, go your way, and leave our votary,' the tout answered.

- Weeping huge tears which fell on his chubby cheeks, Mahadev pulled Parvati near him and then explored for his wallet in the pocket of the shirt he had left behind before going to dip in the Sangham. It was not there. He looked furiously in the other pocket. No, he recalled he had put it in the pocket he had searched first. Panic-stricken, he took up his trousers and dug his hands into its two pockets. There was no sign of the wallet. The pallor of death spread on his face and he turned towards the high priest and the tout, now angrily, accusingly.

'A thousand rupees!' the tout said.

'You have stolen my money!' Mahadev shouted. 'Give me my wallet or I will call the police!'

'The thief threatening the sheriff!' the tout said to the crowd and raised his hand to strike Mahadev.

Parvati was weeping hysterically now. The ceremony of her innocent desire had been drowned in this vulgar brawl.

Mahadev looked at the two priests helplessly and, with a sudden loathing that would not transgress the code of good manners he had learnt, he surveyed the crowd for the figure of a policeman. There seemed none within reach.

'If you want to spare yourself more trouble at their hands, sir, please go away,' a well-spoken pilgrim suggested.

Mahadev picked up his clothes and, putting his arm round Parvati, moved away. He had never felt so near her before. . . .



Eagles and Pigeons

FROM Mishtar Ghulam Mustafa, resident at 11 King's Lane, off Paradise Street, Libpool, this letter is sent to his father, Chaudhri Ahmed Din, peon Canal Department, Village Kanowan, Tehsil Gurdaspur, District Gurdaspur.

After salaams and respects to my mother, I have to say that by the grace of Allah I have reached Libpool safely, and I hasten to write to you because you may not read about my safety in the newspapers; in the Angrezi newspapers the names of only sahib seamen, who have died or survived from pop-guns, bombs and torpedoes, are written and not the names of native seamen and Lascars; and I don't know if the Hindustani newspapers have any news of what is going on in these parts. Respected father, ask my mother not to be frightened if she learns that I have been saved from death, saved just when the Angel of Death, Israel, flew over like an eagle and dropped bombs and sank the vessel in which I had been working. Twelve sahibs and twenty-three Hindustani seamen dived into the sea for ever, and I swam for four hours in the icy sea before a boat which was truly like Hazrat Noah's Ark picked me up. As you know, I always laughed at the Mullah for saying everything was ordained by God, and mocked at my mother for believing in Fate, and I still don't believe in either, but I tell you one thing—the moment when Life meets Death is frightening.

It all happened in this way. One day I was riding a bicycle—do not be amazed, but I learnt to ride the steel horse in an hour; it is simple. An imposing afsar, a second mate sahib from his uniform, stopped me at the door of the docks and asked me if I wanted a boat. This was good luck, for I had not had a boat for four months and in famine times brackish water is sweet.

I told the sahib the time of my service on Angrezi ships, which is now two years and three months out of the four since I left home.

The second mate sahib said: 'If you want a job as a "deckan" I

will fix you on an oil tanker running from here to Africa—six pounds a month and food-lodging.'

I had never before been on such a ship. By the rules of the Angrezi Sarkar we Hindustani seamen are only employed on ships carrying cargo, species of boats for carrying goods as there are species of goods trains. •••

• I signed on and was paid some money in advance, most of which I sent you—I hope you got it in time to pay the mortgage on our holding.

The Calf's teeth seemed golden, so I came home and told some other Hindustani brothers who had been without jobs for one full moon to another for three months. And they too went and signed on. We said to ourselves we will go and see new lands and have some experience. How could we know, Father, that the Eagles would swoop down on us and that we Pigeons would flutter and, leaving half to seek the whole, some of us would drown without finding bottom.

But there is a war on in these parts and no one knows much nowadays because the sea is alive with electricity and the sky is replete with thunder and the wonder is that I am alive to tell the tale.

Perhaps it was the Captan Sahib of the ship who was to blame. We were two days out at sea and never saw him on deck.

The steward sahib was kind, however, and told me not to be frightened of the noises, as, he said, the skipper (which means the Captan in Angrezi) is a gentleman, though he is fond of the bottle and hard on the crew as a spider on the flies.

Our sleeping quarters were better than on other ships: the bed-mats were full of cotton instead of straw, and we had two blankets each and there were no fleas, though there were some bugs and cockroaches. But we did not trouble about them, for to eat the food of beggary is to warm yourself at the fire of chaff and the bread of work is alone honourable—though it is work and sleep for a sailor, more work than sleep!

When we touched port and the oil was emptied we had to go

down to the tanks with buckets and cloths and clean them out. The smell is similar to that in Rahmat's oil-mill, Father, and it gives one a headache, besides stirring the bile. I kept some black pepper seeds in my mouth which Hakeem Hasham Ali used to prescribe for sickness and I fared well. And we were given a ration of rum to put more life into us after we had cleaned the tanks, for it was cold work. And all was well until the calamity visited us which was to visit us.

We were on our way back in an angry sea. And, suddenly, before we knew where we were, a steel bird flew over us.

The third mate aimed a pop-gun and fired at the bird as it swooped down on us like the eagle which snatched the fried bread out of my hand when I was a child.

The eagle's excrement is said to spread leprosy whenever it falls. The filth which this steel bird excreted, and which at first fell in the sea, spread a poisonous smoke all over us.

For a while this raider from the skies made off and we breathed freely, though no one could feign a sleep-walk after the shock it gave us.

The Captain, the first, second and the third mate were all running in a confusion.

Some of the seamen and I touched our ears.

But before we had turned to look, lo! the raider had sent a bigger steel bird, as if the first little angel disguised as an eagle had just come to announce our doom and then Hazrat Israel himself had appeared, disguised as a bigger eagle, to drown us in the deluge.

The Angel of Death roared across our ship, hovered round it, turned tail and returned again and again, dropping bombs and scattering bullets, till the tanker became a cauldron in which life was being roasted like grain.

The first, the second, and the third mate fired back with pop-guns, but a few pulses will not burst the stars, and the angel of annihilation had done his work: our ship was on fire and so were our blistering hearts and smoky clay.

I was standing beside our bo'sun, who was wounded on the

deck. I tied a piece of my long shirt on his arm and chest. But, Father, truly he was a brave man. He did not moan or speak, only he could not help the tears in his eyes. I asked him whether he was badly wounded. He shook his head, but he said he had been married only a month and his wife would be sad to know he was dead. The Angrezi seamen, too, Father, have the same hearts as us folk. In fact, they love their women more openly. Don't think I am shameless, or have turned a Christian, but while we Hindustanis beat about the bush the Europeans catch the bird.

The ship was sinking and the crew was jumping overboard.

I lifted the bo'sun and flung him near a boat and then jumped off myself. But when I looked round in the water I could not see him. And from now on each one fought for his own life and for those immediately near him.

I swam and swam and swam until my body was numb with cold and stiff. I remembered Mother, not because I didn't think of you, but because her name comes to me every time I am in danger, and I almost gave up, only straining to keep afloat, thinking in one breath there are a thousand breaths.

And then, wonder of wonders, a ship came towards us. It had got a message from a brave man on our ship who had struck out the telephone without wires in all directions before he had been killed.

Only seventeen of us were picked up, Father, and to-day there is darkness in many homes. But I tell you that it is just chance that I am alive and sit here in the café sipping tea and writing to you a letter from my grateful heart.

You used to say that the ways of God are strange, but truly the ways of man are stranger. If a man slays another man in a street he is a murderer and is hung by the law courts, but if one Sarkar fights another there is no one to do justice between them. Some dacoits, highwaymen and murderers, who started by looting other people's land, have set the world on fire, so that the whole earth has become a funeral pyre. The smoke of war has spread far and wide and everywhere there is darkness, relieved only by the dim

light of hope in men's eyes. Oh, it is a mad world, Father! The robbers have pitted brother against brother, kinsman against kinsman. And they have heaped treachery, murder, lies, on one another like the debt on our family.

No one calls his own curds spoiled, but even some of the seamen sahibs say that they have done many things to our country which are wrong and that we brother seamen will join hands and all wrongs shall be righted.

But our victory is in our own hands, Father, and we have to unite and work for it, with steel courage and iron determination. For freedom does not fall like manna from heaven; it is born of struggle without fear.

Acha, if our own Raj comes I hope all debts will be cancelled, so that I can return home, for farming is best, trades next, service is poverty, and beggary worst of all.

Again with my respectful salaams to you and my mother, and pats on the heads of my brothers and sisters, I am your son,

GHULAM MUSTAFA

